

**Between “success” and “failure”:
The making of a special economic zone in South
Africa**



by

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For the people of Atlantis

Abstract

This thesis is about a development intervention in the period before ‘success’ is achieved or ‘failure’ conclusively announced. Based on an ethnographic study of the Atlantis Special Economic Zone (SEZ) on the periphery of Cape Town, South Africa, it explores how a scheme that claims to generate market participation, but has yet to do so, continues to be represented as plausible.

Established under apartheid as an industrial zone intended to create employment for the ‘Coloured’ population, Atlantis has been reinvented in the democratic era as a green technology SEZ. This setting therefore provides a lens onto contemporary industrial zones, not simply as sites of intensified labour exploitation, a dominant perspective, but as institutionalised fixes for unemployment shaped in political and historical context. Yet expert projections of economic ‘success’, which shape plans, bear little resemblance to everyday life, where unemployment has not been ameliorated. The thesis therefore explores how the SEZ persists, and remains plausible, in practice. It argues that this must be understood through various actors’ navigation and reproduction of undecided outcomes. Representations of the project as a ‘success’ or ‘failure’ are bound up with differently positioned actors’ own projects and prospects.

The thesis first situates the Atlantis SEZ within a longer history of interventions addressing Coloured unemployment, originating in the twentieth century, which largely failed on their own terms. It then examines the peculiar institutional form currently tasked with alleviating unemployment in the area: a hybrid state corporation whose officials draw on the language and techniques of ‘ethical business’ to sustain claims to catalyse ‘market inclusion’. The study turns to the consultants who produce projections of the zone’s future ‘success’, even as they themselves are uncertain and their evaluations are ultimately shaped by the exigencies of a competitive career. Armed with this appreciation of expert storytelling, the thesis focuses in the greatest detail on what actually happens on the ground in the zone. Examining the SEZ’s market inclusion schemes – community participation, skills, and enterprise development – it explores how unemployed Atlantis residents ready themselves for market opportunities, even as these never arrive. In the interim, they pursue what they can get through registration, training,

and the role of ‘participant’: livelihood gains, recognition, status, and relationships with better-off officials on whom they can make claims. Their involvement provides further evidence of ‘inclusion’ in the making, even as formal economic opportunities are deferred.

Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork, in-depth interviews, and archival research, this thesis contributes to anthropological debates about SEZs, development interventions, and the governance of economic life. The everyday workings of a single intervention illuminate how market participation schemes endure when they do not achieve their goals, and the role of diverse actors and interests in sustaining these.

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Abbreviations

ANC	African National Congress
APO	African People's Organisation
BEE	Black Economic Empowerment
B-BBEE	Broad-Based Black Economic Empowerment
CSD	Central Supplier Database
CEO	Chief Executive Officer
CIPC	Companies and Intellectual Property Commission
COSATU	Congress of South African Trade Unions
CIDB	Construction Industry Development Board
CSI	Corporate Social Investment
CSR	Corporate Social Responsibility
CVs	Curricula Vitae
DEDAT	Department for Economic Development and Tourism
DOE	Department of Energy
DoL	Department of Labour
DTIC	Department of Trade, Industry and Competition
GIZ	Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit
EIP	Eco-Industrial Park
ESG	Environmental and Social Governance
EPZs	Export Processing Zones
FDI	Foreign Direct Investment
FTZs	Free Trade Zones
GEAR	Growth, Employment, and Redistribution Programme
IDZ	Industrial Development Zone
IMF	International Monetary Fund
KPIs	Key Performance Indicators
KZN	Kwa-Zulu Natal
MERSETA	Manufacturing, Engineering and Related Services Sector Education and Training Authority
NGOs	Non-Governmental Organisations
QCTO	Quality Control Council for Trades and Occupations
RDP	Reconstruction and Development Programme
REIPPP	Renewable Energy Independent Power Producer Procurement
RFP	Request for Proposals
SETAs	Sector Education and Training Authorities
SMME	Small, Medium, and Micro Enterprise
SANCO	South African National Civics Organisation

SARS	South African Revenue Service
SEZ	Special Economic Zone
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
TOR	Terms of Reference
UNCTAD	United Nations Conference on Trade and Development
UNIDO	United Nations Industrial Development Organisation

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Introduction

Doubtful inclusion: Towards an anthropological approach to development interventions between ‘success’ and ‘failure’

After the transition from apartheid, when the Black majority was officially granted political citizenship, the African National Congress (ANC) was faced with the challenge of providing economic upliftment as well.¹ Following the decisive shift from the Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) to the Growth, Employment, and Redistribution Programme (GEAR) in 1996, this was to be achieved within a conservative macroeconomic regime. That regime privileged economic growth and individualised market participation over redistribution (Bond, 2000; Hart, 2002; Marais, 1998). But over thirty years in, the promise that democracy would be coupled with socioeconomic transformation has been contradicted by extremely high inequality and the persistence of chronic and growing structural unemployment.

Few would disagree that unemployment is one of South Africa’s most pressing problems. The country’s unemployment levels are some of the highest in the world, having officially risen from 24.5% in 2015 to 31.4% at the end of 2025 (excluding discouraged job seekers) (Stats SA, 2025). High unemployment in the democratic era led Jeremy Seekings and Nicoli Nattrass (2005, p.4) to argue that while privilege and disadvantage continue to overlap significantly with race here, the ‘basis of disadvantage [has] shifted from race to class’. They point out a new divide that

¹ In this thesis, I use the term ‘Black’ to collectively refer to all ‘non-White’ people. Otherwise, I use the terms ‘African’, ‘Coloured’, and ‘White’, according to prevailing norms and official racial classifications. As will be explained later in this introduction, and further in Chapter 1, racial categorisation has a long and contested history in South Africa. I choose to capitalise these terms, therefore, to indicate that I myself do not intend to naturalise these categories, even as I recognise, and explore, their enduring significance in South Africa.

permeates democratic South Africa: access to formal jobs. They argue that a distinct new ‘underclass’ has emerged, comprised of those who have little or no purchase in the labour market. This points to the importance of examining the kinds of interventions advanced to address mass unemployment, and how they operate in practice.

An appreciation of the nature of unemployment itself is required. South Africa began to evidence growing unemployment during the 1970s, with structural changes in the global economy due to mechanisation and financialisation (Simkins, 1982; Simkins and Clarke, 1978). Unemployment worsened in the democratic era, in part because more African women entered the labour force (Banerjee et al., 2008). But changing economic policy also played a major role: trade and financial sector liberalisation in the early 1990s exposed South Africa to intense global competition in major sectors, like textiles, as capital relocated in search of cheaper wages (Seekings and Nattrass, 2005). ‘Jobless growth’ in financial and other high-skill service sectors further rendered the majority low-skilled population redundant to formal economic production (Bhorat and Leibbrandt, 1996).

The South African case offers a window onto global trends. Across much of the Global South, chronic structural unemployment has grown since the 1970s, leading to a revised focus on the concept of ‘surplus populations’. Marx (1887) used the concept of ‘relative surplus populations’ to argue that unemployment is functional to capitalism, in that unemployed populations serve to bring down the wages of the employed, and to stand in as a ‘reserve army’ for capital’s expansion into new sectors. But, more recently, Tania Li (2010; 2013; 2017) has argued that the unemployed are in such large numbers that many are no longer ‘relatively’ but ‘absolutely’ surplus to the needs of capital at any scale (see also Ferguson and Li, 2018). A major claim of more recent perspectives on unemployment is that there are many millions of people

around the world who will, in fact, *never* become employed (see also Ferguson, 2015).

While structural unemployment is therefore by no means a uniquely South African phenomenon, it does have sharpened stakes in this context. This is because of the historic centrality of waged work in organising lives and livelihoods here. Under both colonial and apartheid regimes, which experienced chronic labour shortages, colonised subjects were dispossessed of their land and forced to work on farms, mines, and later, factories, coming to rely on wages for livelihoods (Beinart, 2001; Bolt and Rajak, 2016). Meanwhile, ‘informal’ trading among the Black population – as a potential alternative to wage work – was heavily repressed (Hart and Padayachee, 2000; Krige, 2011; Seekings and Nattrass, 2005, p.142). As Frederick Cooper (2002, p.194) wrote, ‘wage-labour capitalism, in most of Africa, takes place on islands in a sea of other sorts of socio-economic relations; in South Africa, wage-labour capitalism pervades the economy’.

Through this historical process of proletarianisation, waged work became not just the primary source of livelihoods, but a marker of identity, social status, and belonging for many – reinforced by Christian ideologies valorising productive labour (Ferguson, 2015; Lawhon, Millington and Stokes, 2018). A legacy of this is that, today, even amidst rising structural unemployment, meaningful citizenship (beyond just formal political rights) is contingent on a person’s ability to be economically productive (Barchiesi, 2011; Scully, 2019). Indeed, even among the unemployed themselves, many not only aspire to have formal jobs or to start successful businesses, but feel, as a fruit of democratic citizenship, that they are entitled to these kinds of opportunities (Dawson and Fouksman, 2020; Fouksman, 2020; Scully and Moyo, 2022). Moreover, government policy and schemes for socioeconomic improvement continue to place employment creation, and more broadly

individualised market participation, centre stage. These continue to be cast as the primary route through which the poor and mass unemployed are supposed to secure not only livelihoods but even basic dignity in a terribly unequal society.

Yet if such interventions repeatedly struggle to generate meaningful employment and other market opportunities, how do they endure in practice? This thesis explores this question through an ethnographic study of one such scheme that promises the unemployed improved lives and livelihoods through the market: the Atlantis Special Economic Zone (SEZ) for green technology, located forty kilometres outside Cape Town. It examines how, even as this scheme has yet to deliver on its promise of market inclusion, it is nonetheless socially reproduced.

Home to over 70 000 people, Atlantis has been described in official terms as being in ‘crisis’ and needing urgent intervention (City of Cape Town, 2011, p.3). A 2011 report to the Executive Mayoral Committee of the City of Cape Town reads:

Already high unemployment levels [then at 35 per cent] are rising even further, underpinning an escalation in crime, gang activities, drug abuse and domestic violence, to name a few (City of Cape Town, 2011, p.2).

Residents describe Atlantis as ‘*die verlore stad*’ (Afrikaans for ‘the lost city’), as ‘a different country’, and as ‘behind the curve of 1994’.

The Atlantis SEZ is officially presented as a response to unemployment and its associated social ills, in line with national policy and international best practices on how to engender market participation in a ‘sustainable’ and even ‘ethical’ way. In support of this vision, the SEZ boasts a series of ‘inclusionary’ programmes. Community participation promises to ensure the local population is adequately consulted and the zone has a social licence to operate. Skills development prepares the unemployed with ‘green’ skills to match existing market demand. Enterprise

development is to equip local entrepreneurs with the appropriate business acumen and formalised credentials to ‘share value’ in expanding value chains.

But after over ten years in the making, the SEZ has yet to create many formal opportunities. Indeed, throughout my fieldwork in Atlantis in 2022, the site allocated for the zone remained a dusty and overgrown patch of land.² At the time of writing, the zone still has not attracted the initially projected investment, as capital has agglomerated closer to the glitzy global hotspot, Cape Town, or elsewhere. Intended ‘beneficiaries’ remain largely unemployed and struggle on a daily basis to make ends meet.

The Atlantis SEZ’s failure to create jobs is even starker when set in wider historical perspective. Atlantis was originally developed by the apartheid state in the 1970s, as an industrial zone for so-called ‘Coloured’ populations. As a high-profile instantiation of the apartheid state’s national industrial decentralisation programme, the original designs projected enough jobs to support half a million people by 2010 (du Plooy, 1976). By the early 1980s newspapers began lamenting the growing poverty and unemployment in the newly built town, which residents experienced as remote and isolated from the Cape Town economy (Ebrahim et al., 1986).

The green technology SEZ is best understood as the most recent iteration of a state-led initiative established to address unemployment in the region. Yet, despite this longer history of failure, and despite creating few formal opportunities for the unemployed, this intervention endures. It has neither been declared an outright ‘failure’, nor does anyone view it straightforwardly as a ‘success’. Indeed, this is a project whose outcomes are undecided, as they hinge on the arrival of investment,

² While technically the zone did have existing tenants, these were located outside the land designated for the SEZ itself. Attracted by the original Project Management Unit, before the zone company was established, these factories got special permission to benefit from potential zone incentives, even though physically located outside of its perimeters. While these factories have been celebrated as ‘evidence’ of the zone’s potential investment attraction and job creation, they hardly amount to the achievement of official goals, or consultants’ projected metrics, discussed further in Chapters 2 and 3.

about which none of its key protagonists have certain knowledge. Even so, the project continues to animate the active involvement of a wide range of actors and to generate official evidence of its own plausibility – not yet as a truly ‘successful’ SEZ, but one in the making. It continues to run, to meet institutional performance criteria, and to secure funding from national and provincial government stakeholders.

The thesis traces the work of the zone company established to run the SEZ and examines how it comes to be represented, among officials and in official documents, as a ‘socially responsible’ and ‘ethical’ corporation capable of engendering market inclusion. Consultants’ projections, backed by ‘cutting-edge’ economic expertise, substantiate the zone’s prospects in the absence of material results. The company’s market inclusion schemes – community participation, skills, and enterprise development – recruit Atlantis residents to partake in various trainings and events, which are documented as evidence of company ‘progress’ at preparing a population for market participation.

By showing the diverse forms of effort that go into producing these representations, this thesis demonstrates how the zone is reproduced as an officially plausible engine of market inclusion in practice – or at least not yet a ‘failed’ one. The central question of this thesis is therefore why a scheme that does not deliver on its own terms continues to sustain the active participation of diverse actors. This is an ethnographic study of the practices, interests, self-understandings, and relationships that enable such a scheme to persist in the interim between ‘success’ and ‘failure’. This introduction therefore argues for analytical attention to the productive role of undecidedness, or doubt – among ‘experts’, officials, and ‘beneficiaries’ – in explaining how development interventions are socially reproduced.

In what follows, I introduce three fields of literature which together help to advance this approach, before providing a discussion of my methodology, and an

outline of the thesis. I begin by considering existing anthropological approaches to SEZs which have so far emphasised flexible and exploitative labour conditions, whereas I argue for a perspective on zones as developmental efforts to address unemployment, whose common failures need critical explanation. Next, I introduce enduring debates in the anthropology of development, to explore how development 'failure' has been treated here. Existing approaches in this field help to understand why developmental interventions persist in practice, even when they do not achieve their goals. To these I contribute a focus on programme persistence in a case where outcomes are officially inconclusive, and where both 'success' and 'failure' are widely considered to be simultaneously possible. Finally, to develop an approach to understanding how differently positioned actors navigate the discrepancy between 'expert' and official narratives about the zone's future, and the more uncertain reality they experience, I draw on anthropological perspectives on how different kinds of actors navigate uncertainty, and doubt, in formalised economic situations like this.

Reorienting the study of zones: From labour exploitation to fixes for unemployment

SEZs take various forms, including Export Processing Zones (EPZs), Free Trade Zones (FTZs), financial services zones, and technology and science parks, among others. Despite this diversity, they are typically geographically delimited spaces in which selected business, trade, and labour regulations are relaxed to attract Foreign Direct Investment (FDI), promote export-oriented growth, and stimulate industrialisation and employment. While accounts vary, most agree that the export-oriented zone model was popularised during the 1970s and 1980s. This followed the United Nations Industrial Development Organisation's (UNIDO) promotion of zones after the apparent success of cases in Puerto Rico, Taiwan, Singapore, Mauritius, and

China (Easterling, 2012; Neveling, 2020). EPZs were subsequently incorporated into the World Bank and International Monetary Fund's (IMF) structural adjustment programmes, which postcolonial states had to comply with to access financial assistance after the 'Third World' debt crisis (Neveling, 2020). Although advocates frame zones as engines of development, critical studies have come to treat them as sites for analysing contemporary forms of labour exploitation associated with global political-economic transformations.

Much of this scholarship situates the proliferation of zones within the rise of 'neoliberalism'. While the concept has multiple, overlapping meanings that risk analytical imprecision (Clarke, 2008, p.135), the use of the concept is often anchored in two influential formulations. The first is David Harvey's (2005) neo-Marxist account, which conceptualises neoliberalism as the political/ideological project of a class seeking to restore and expand opportunities for capital accumulation, since the 1970s. Underpinned by the ideology that human wellbeing is best achieved through free markets and individual entrepreneurial freedom, this project involved widespread privatisation, deregulation of capital and labour, and the alleged withdrawal of the state from many areas of social provisioning.

Although Harvey does not write explicitly about zones, scholars building on his account of neoliberalism and his earlier work on flexible accumulation (Harvey, 1989) argue that labour exploitation in zones reflects the strategies of deregulated or 'footloose' global capital. From this perspective, zones enable capital to sustain high profit rates amidst intense global competition by offering the cheapest and most flexible labour arrangements (Campbell, 2018; Neveling, 2020; 2021). This 'flexibilisation' of labour is often contrasted with earlier Fordist regimes that provided relatively stable, secure, and frequently unionised employment – at least temporarily in the Global North (Campbell, 2018). By contrast, zones are said to shift

the risks and costs of production onto workers, undermining job security and suppressing wages. This is because capital can exit rapidly when labour becomes costly or resistant, producing a 'race to the bottom' in wages and labour standards (see also Shakya, 2018).

Many of the labour dynamics associated with zones and later theorised under the rubric of neoliberalism were first analysed in earlier work on the new international division of labour (Fröbel, Heinrichs and Kreye, 1980; Nash and Fernández-Kelly, 1983), which examined the relocation of labour-intensive manufacturing from the Global North to the Global South. Early studies of SEZs drew attention to the highly feminised composition of zone workforces, justified through discourses of women's 'nimble fingers' and presumed docility (Elson and Pearson, 1981). SEZs thus provided a lens onto gendered forms of exploitation, as well as women's agency and resistance, at the intersection of market forces, domestic political regimes, and patriarchal social relations (Lee, 1998; Lynch, 2007; Mills, 2003; Ong, 1987; Pun, 2005; Salzinger, 2003).

A second influential approach to neoliberalism draws on Foucauldian analyses of governmentality. Aihwa Ong (2006) theorises neoliberalism as a reconfiguration of the relationship between government and knowledge, through which governing activities are recast as nonpolitical and nonideological (Rose and Miller, 1992). Neoliberal governmentality is the result of the infiltration of market-driven truths and calculations into the domain of politics, inducing subjects to self-manage according to principles of discipline, efficiency, and competitiveness (Barry, Osborne and Rose, 1996). Building on this, Ong contributed a perspective on zones as sites of 'neoliberal exception' in non-Western and authoritarian contexts where market-based governance is not otherwise the norm. She argued that zones produce distinctive and often highly exploitative labour arrangements as full citizenship

rights (like rights to access housing and education for children applied elsewhere in a country) are extended only to those deemed to possess marketable skills.

Whether SEZs are best understood as exceptional enclaves or as extensions of broader political-economic processes has been contested. Jamie Cross (2010) argues that SEZs are structurally embedded within, rather than separated from, national economies. He argues that in the Indian context, zones do not constitute bounded spaces but instead formalise and intensify forms of precarity that characterise much economic life, drawing on casual, informal, and insecure labour arrangements that extend well beyond their nominal borders. Moreover, Cross questions the assumption that workers outside zones enjoy inalienable rights denied to those within, noting that such rights have often been absent in practice.

The focus on labour exploitation foregrounded in anthropological scholarship on SEZs is valuable for understanding the experiences of those employed within zones under conditions of flexible accumulation and neoliberal governance. However, it obscures another set of dynamics central to contemporary capitalism: unemployment in contexts with uneven integration into global circuits of capital. In zones in the Global South, employment can be short-lived when capital relocates rapidly (Shakya, 2018). Even where zones attract sustained investment, they do not necessarily generate substantial employment for local populations. In some of India's SEZs, for example, investment has been channelled into knowledge-intensive IT services or luxury real estate rather than labour-intensive manufacturing (Cross, 2014; Levien, 2011; 2012; 2013). As Levien (2011, p.480) argues, land dispossession for SEZs in India has produced 'a pool of surplus rural labour that is more marginalised than exploited'. How should zones be understood when they fail to create significant employment at all?

Policy-oriented literature evaluating SEZs in Africa consistently portrays them as falling short of expectations regarding FDI attraction, export promotion, and job creation (Farole, 2011; Jauch, 2002; UNCTAD, 2021; Watson, 2001). A United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) (2021, p.35) handbook on African SEZs explains that many of the continent's zones have high vacancy rates and underused infrastructure, and make only marginal contributions to employment. While many policy reports suggest that African zones could become more successful by adhering to 'international best practice', Makgetla (2021) argues that zones in Southern Africa are constrained less by implementation failures than by structural obstacles to industrialisation absent in East Asia, including heavy dependence on mining, weak manufacturing capacity, and limited regional demand.

South Africa exemplifies these dynamics. Despite possessing a relatively developed industrial base prior to trade liberalisation in the 1990s, and despite comparatively high levels of public funding for zones, here zones have largely failed to attract investment and to create jobs at scale (Makgetla, 2021).³ They have been unable to overcome broader national challenges, including declining FDI and reduced participation in global trade as a share of GDP since 2008 (Toussaint et al., 2019).

These 'underperforming' zones are widespread globally – particularly in Africa – but they remain neglected in critical ethnographic literature. Rather than sites of labour exploitation, they are better understood as institutionalised attempts to address unemployment that do not achieve their stated goals. South Africa is an ideal place from which to explore this phenomenon not just because its contemporary zones create few opportunities, but because here zones have had a

³ Of the eleven SEZs designated in the country, seven are operational. Of these, one SEZ, Coega near Port Elizabeth, accounts for over half of all private investment (as of 2021) (Makgetla, 2021).

longer history of being used to address unemployment – grounded in distinct political projects, shifting forms of ‘expertise’, and changing political economic conditions. Those earlier efforts were examined in Marxist perspectives about apartheid-era industrial zones. As the next section shows, these perspectives provide a critical foundation for interrogating contemporary efforts to cultivate labour markets through zones, and for understanding what is at stake in their repeated failures to deliver on the vision of socioeconomic improvement they promise.

Apartheid’s zones

The apartheid regime launched a scheme for industrial decentralisation in 1960, offering extensive subsidies to White capital for the employment of African, and later Coloured, labour in designated areas (see Chapter 1). While officially intended to create employment and ‘development’ in rural areas, in support of the political project of racially ‘separate development’, by the 1970s economists and urban planners increasingly judged these zones unsuccessful (Addleson and Tomlinson, 1986; Bell, 1973; Tomlinson, 1983). Trevor Bell (1973) showed that the policy created only five percent of the national increase in industrial employment between 1960 and 1966, despite wages – normally the primary market incentive – being approximately half those in urban centres. Others argued that the zones destroyed more jobs than they created (Belcher, 1979; Rogerson, 1982).

While many attributed these outcomes to policy design failures (Maasdorp, 1980; Nieuwenhuysen, 1962), or to the racist ideology underpinning the policy (Dewar, Todes and Watson, 1986a), Marxist scholars offered an alternative explanation. Early contributions argued that industrial decentralisation was never intended to create ‘development’ in the first place (Johnstone, 1970; Legassick,

1974a; 1974b; Wolpe, 1972). Particularly influential, Harold Wolpe (1972) and Martin Legassick (1974a; 1974b) argued that industrial decentralisation was rather intended for the reproduction of extra-exploited labour.

Writing in the context of the post–Second World War manufacturing boom, they suggested that while demand for cheap labour was expanding, the earlier system of labour control rooted in the ‘native reserves’ (later Bantustans) had broken down. Declining agricultural capacity in the reserves – long central to subsidising the costs of African social reproduction, as workers could return home when sick or elderly – threatened surplus value extraction (Wolpe, 1972). At the same time, rapid industrialisation and uncontrolled African urbanisation had fuelled growing militancy among urban African workers, undermining labour control.

Industrial decentralisation, they argued, was a fix for these contradictions. An increasingly militant African labour force could be dispersed to the peripheries, where wages were also lower. Moreover, here Africans were allowed to perform the semi-skilled work that legislation elsewhere reserved for Whites, thereby releasing more cheap labour into the market. Legassick (1974a; 1974b) added that decentralisation reduced labour turnover, as rural workers spent more time in employment than migrants travelling long distances to urban centres.

But, even among those who prominently argued that zones reproduced extra-exploited labour (see also Pickles, 1988; 1991; Rogerson, 1982; Tomlinson and Hyslop, 1984), there was the recognition that zones were not, in fact, creating much employment. Legassick (1974b, p.280) noted that industry had become increasingly capital-intensive, such that ‘the problem is now one of creating sufficient employment to meet [labour] supply’. He used the Marxist concept of a ‘reserve army of labour’ to argue that unemployment remained functional to capital in keeping

labour cheap (Legassick, 1974a; Legassick and Wolpe, 1976). Hence, irrespective of their (lack of) employment creation, zones were cast as functional to capitalism.

A minority took a different position. Martin Fransman (1975, p.39) argued that unemployment in South Africa had reached an extent that a portion of the unemployed was 'dysfunctional', that is, having no effect on labour costs (see also Belcher, 1979). This 'marginalised' portion, he argued, was not just temporarily but permanently excluded from the capitalist mode of production (Quijano 1974).

In his view, the failure of industrial zones to create promised employment served different ends. Fransman (1974) argued that zones enabled the state to promote a *claim* that it was attempting to assist the chronically unemployed – crucially, without actually having to achieve this (see also Innes and O'Meara, 1976). In other words, industrial decentralisation was a cheap way to 'convince' the unemployed of forthcoming 'development', entailing:

The publicising of the government's rural development attempts and the convincing of the population that these are leading to "development for the masses"... [even if the] total resources that are so devoted are undoubtedly not what government propaganda would lead the population to believe (Fransman, 1974, p.17).

Compared to the fiscal burden of genuinely supporting social reproduction for 'the masses', industrial decentralisation required relatively limited expenditure, largely dedicated to subsidising White-owned industry and infrastructure. The substantive costs of social reproduction in practice were offloaded onto the poor themselves, as the unemployed relied on redistribution within working-class households and extended kinship networks, and to a lesser extent on the 'informal' sector (see also Legassick and Wolpe, 1976, p.104).

Fransman (1975) concluded that, as a promise of improvement, industrial decentralisation helped legitimise the very capitalist system that rendered people permanently 'surplus', while offering few alternative livelihoods. He concluded that the scheme served to:

Legitimise the domination of the non-capitalist mode [by the capitalist mode] both internationally (in the eyes of "the world") as well as domestically (in the eyes of the peasants and workers in the non-capitalist mode) (Fransman, 1975, p.8).

These latter perspectives of unemployment as structural and permanent resonate most closely with contemporary analyses of unemployment in South Africa, and elsewhere in the Global South, discussed earlier. Viewed through this lens, the failure of contemporary zones to generate meaningful welfare for their supposed 'beneficiaries' is not accidental, nor is it simply a matter of poor implementation. Instead, such failure is a functional result of a capitalist system reproducing itself, 'dealing' with the problem of the mass unemployed with as few costs to the public purse as possible.

This offers a fresh starting point through which to critically examine contemporary SEZs: as institutionalised fixes for unemployment, shaped in historical and political context, that promise formal economic incorporation but only deliver it symbolically. Atlantis is a particularly fruitful site through which to explore this phenomenon.

Originally a zone for Coloured employment

Unlike the zones primarily discussed in the Marxist literature, Atlantis was originally developed as a zone specifically for 'Coloured' populations, under the banner of the apartheid industrial decentralisation programme. It took shape on the back of a

longer history of chronic unemployment, and attempts to address it, among this specific group.

Contrary to popular definitions of 'Coloured' people as 'mixed race' (Macmillan and Philip, 1927; Marais, 1939), historians have demonstrated that the population emerged from a collective of mixed-race 'bastards', freed slaves, and Khoi and San (Goldin, 1987; Lewis, 1987; Van der Ross, 1986). This group came to share a distinct political economic position after the abolition of slavery in 1833, when freed slaves joined the ranks of the Khoi in the Cape as a landless, labouring class (Elbourne, 1994; Elphick, 1985; Marks, 1972; Marks and Gray, 1975, pp.439-451; Newton-King, 1980; Simons and Simons, 1983; Trapido, 1980; Walker, 1959). But it was only later, in the mid-1800s, that a shared racial identity formed – in response to a threat to their position in the labour market (Adhikari, 2009b). This followed the arrival of waves of African migrants and recruited labour, first from the Eastern Cape (in the late 1830s) (Saunders, 1979a; Saunders, 1979b; Saunders, 1980). Africans began to substitute for Coloured labour at the lower rungs of the labour market progressively over time, in part catalysed by a string of strikes by the 'Cape Boys' beginning in 1854 (Bickford-Smith, 1980). Later, competition from recently arrived European artisans further threatened Coloured employment from 'above' (van Duin, 1989).

That their racial identity was tied inextricably to their working-class status helps, in part, to explain why their unemployment came to be seen in official terms as a problem and why, throughout the twentieth century, Coloured unemployment became the object of successive state interventions aiming to put people into work, ranging from labour bureaus, to public works programmes, to the development of Atlantis as an apartheid era industrial zone resting on the promised inculcation of market demand for labour (see Chapter 1). While these schemes played a role in

stabilising the racial category, they were never very successful at creating mass employment at the envisioned scale.

Unemployment in Atlantis remains a public preoccupation in the post-apartheid era. But, as the most recent intervention here, the Atlantis SEZ is shaped by vastly different political economic conditions, and different 'expertise'. The SEZ is no longer explicitly a solution to 'Coloured' unemployment, but rather for that of all Black locals, according to the post-apartheid political project of Black Economic Empowerment (BEE) (see Chapter 6). Moreover, as a green technology SEZ, the zone claims to follow best practices that make it more 'sustainable' and 'ethical' than zones of old. Taking this longer historical view, the Atlantis SEZ is an apt case for exploring institutionalised efforts to deal with unemployment in contemporary capitalism, and their lack of success.

Between 'failure' and 'success' in development

What the South African literature on zones lays bare, precisely because employment creation is the central issue, is that industrial zones are a particular type of 'development' intervention, that is, a planned intervention in the service of a vision of socioeconomic 'improvement'. In South Africa, zones have over time been overtly positioned, whether by proponents or critics, as the projects of a developmental state. For this reason, turning to a critical ethnographic literature on development interventions is useful. A set of perspectives here helps us to unpack not just the apparent regularity of development 'failure', but also why diverse actors continue to partake in interventions that do not deliver on their aims, and how projects even come to appear 'successful' regardless of their outcomes. What this thesis contributes

to this field, in turn, is a focus on a development intervention that persists in the interim before ‘failure’ or ‘success’ have been conclusively established.

Critical ethnographic studies of development interventions have long asked why schemes that claim to improve the human condition tend to fail (Scott, 1998). Early work resisted explanations based on hidden interests or an underlying ‘logic of capital’ (Ferguson, 1994; Mitchell, 2002). Marxist analyses of apartheid-era zones, in part driven by political opposition to apartheid itself, tended to interpret their failure to generate employment as evidence of their function in reproducing racialised capitalism. This not only represented the poor in terms of ‘false consciousness’, but it homogenised the interests of apartheid era officials (see Posel, 1987; Sparks, 2023), and class factions (see O’Meara, 1983). Certainly today, the diversity of intentions and interests entangled in official efforts to deal with unemployment require more nuanced treatment.

To get beyond explanations resting on hidden interests, scholars proposed instead to examine how structural effects, like forms of social control, are reproduced even beyond the intentions of any particular people or groups.⁴ James Ferguson (1994) argued that diagnosing development ‘failure’ alone is insufficient. Instead, he aimed to investigate what development projects actually *do* in practice. In his famous ethnography of the Thaba-Tseka rural development project in Lesotho, Ferguson (1994, p.25) argues that interventions may generate systematic effects – such as the expansion of bureaucratic state power – ‘behind the backs or against the wills of even the most powerful actors’. These effects, and their simultaneous invisibility, he

⁴ This approach, influenced by Foucault, seeks to explore the more complex relationship between the intentionality of planning and the ‘strategic intelligibility’ (Ferguson, 1994), or political or strategic significance, of outcomes (see also Willis, 1981). For example, in Foucault’s (1979) genealogy of the prison, he explores how the institution of the prison, popularly considered to have ‘failed’ in its official intention of rehabilitating citizens to return to ‘normal’ society, does not in fact fail to secure social control. The prison produces the ‘delinquent’, a pathologized category of person, who, apparently marginal, is in fact constituted through a heavily supervised setting, making such people easier to control.

argues, arise from the operation of the “development” apparatus’ (1994, p.20) itself: a genre of institutionalised knowledge production wherein ‘problems’ are narrowly defined according to readily available technical ‘solutions’ (see also Rose, 1999).

More recent perspectives on development interventions take us further still. Departing from Ferguson, who, following Michel Foucault, takes structural effects as evidence of a ‘conceptual apparatus’ at work (Dupont and Pearce, 2001; Latour, 2000), these newer perspectives give explicit analytical room to the intelligence that actors have of their own interests, and to how they rationalise their own actions in everyday institutional and social life (Gupta, 2012; Lewis and Mosse, 2006; Li, 2000; Li, 2007; Mathur, 2015; Mosse, 2004; 2005; Yarrow and Venkatesan, 2012). Whereas Ferguson spends little time engaging with the ideas and self-understandings of practitioners, Tania Li (2007) argues that development interventions cannot, in many instances, be explained other than at face value, as driven by the sincerely benevolent and even utopian commitments of practitioners (see also Cruikshank, 1999). This ‘will to improve’, she suggests, helps to explain how, even as development interventions regularly fail, and as they reproduce forms of structural inequality, new ones will always be devised in their place. Failure in this view is not incidental, but productive, in the sense that the development industry is ‘parasitic on its own shortcomings’ (2007, p.1).

The parallels with Atlantis’s own history are obvious here. Nevertheless, Li’s emphasis on actors’ self-awareness has its limits, and appreciating these is important for framing my analysis. Drawing on Foucault’s (1991) theory of governmentality, Li (2007) argues that interventions claiming to improve populations work by educating desires, and configuring habits, aspirations, and beliefs (see also Rose, 1999). Key to what Li argues, though, is that schemes can be ‘contested’ (2007, pp.22-27). This often occurs as actors have a clear sense of the defects of programmes and are critical

of 'unkept promises' (2007, p.2). Li's analysis tends to foreground moments in which subjects are induced to partake diligently in schemes, or else emerge as their critics. This approach needs further complicating to grasp the more ambivalent, and dynamic relationships diverse actors have to the promise of improvement in Atlantis, and why they participate, even as they recognise project shortcomings.

To understand how this scheme, which does not achieve its goals, nonetheless persists in practice requires taking a different approach, not just to actors' orientations to the project, but also to questions of development failure itself. In Ferguson's (1994) case, everyone, including himself, knew the project was a failure, and it is this 'fact' that he seeks to get beyond. Li (2007) describes cases in which failure has become perceptible enough to generate contestation and reformulation. In Atlantis, the fate of the project has by no means been declared an outright 'failure'. On the contrary, actors remain rather more undecided about how to view the project, and official reports even attest to its 'progress' and even possibly imminent 'success'. As others have come to show, 'failure' in development is rarely self-evident. Diagnoses of project 'failure' are rather the outcome of negotiations over meaning and must be actively produced and sustained (Latour, 1996; Mosse, 2005; Venugopal, 2018).

Turning the concern with development failure on its head, David Mosse (2005) take a different approach to understanding how projects are sustained in practice. He argues that what tends to animate development programmes, irrespective of their outcomes on the ground, is a preoccupation with representing project coherence and 'success'. In an ethnography of a British-funded international aid programme in rural Western India, Mosse (2005, p.156) shows a 'hidden operational logic' at work: recruiting political support, securing funding, and building and maintaining reputations and relationships. His ethnography

demonstrates how development policy (which he defines as all kinds of development models, project designs, and strategies) is ‘translated’ in practice ‘upwards’ and ‘downwards’ by skilful ‘brokers’, such that a network of actors become enrolled in sustaining coherent representations (see also Latour, 1996; Lewis and Mosse, 2006; Long, 1992). Crucial to the ‘success’ of development projects, he argues, is not just ‘what a project does, but also how and to whom it speaks, who can be made to believe in it’ (2005, p.158).

Mosse lays out a series of compelling strategic and instrumental reasons why diverse actors participate in schemes, and in the production of their ‘success’, even when they do not fully deliver what they promise. This approach is key for understanding Atlantis as well. Atlantis’ very inception was wrapped up in the ideological and career ambitions of national and provincial government officials (Chapter 2). For zone company officials, their everyday work is organised around representing the zone as successful (or at least on its way there), in part because this is key to securing government funding, keeping jobs, and advancing their own careers. Consultants too have their careers to think about (Chapter 3). Meanwhile, for residents, beyond genuine hope that the promises of employment will be realised – even ‘desperation’ – participation in company programmes offers pathways to other advantages, not least of which are relationships with officials, on whom distributive claims can be made (Chapters 4, 5, and 6).

In sum, understanding how the Atlantis SEZ, as an institutionalised solution to unemployment, which does not achieve its goals, is nonetheless reproduced in practice requires moving beyond both arguments about a hidden logic of capitalism, and the ‘new functionalism’ (Latour, 2000) of Foucauldian explanations which take the sustained effects of projects as social explanation in itself. Instead, this thesis builds on perspectives in development studies that focus on the institutional and

social life of projects, and the myriad ideas, motivations, and practices, that animate them in the everyday – particularly, the institutionalised imperative to represent project ‘success’, irrespective of actual outcomes.

But in taking this approach, this thesis seeks to complicate the binary between projects which are officially ‘successful’, versus those that are seen to have ‘failed’. This thesis examines an intervention whose status cannot firmly be described as either. The zone is reproduced in a condition where its outcome remains unresolved. As an ethnographer, I myself came to occupy a similar position of uncertainty: unable to say definitively that the zone might not soon enough start to attract major investment, given its proximity to Cape Town, and given emerging evidence that the region is fast becoming a hub for renewable energy and green technology manufacturing (Grant, Carmody and Murphy, 2020).

Accounts of the reproduction of development success implicitly straddle this tension (produced by competing possible interpretations). Mosse’s (2005, p.175) own account appears to acknowledge this when he notes the uneasiness and even ‘anxiety’ from a ‘false atmosphere’ accompanying the maintenance of official representations of success. In his account it was ‘common knowledge’ (2005, p.663) among reflective donor-policy makers that models obscure institutional practice. Mosse surmises, though, that ‘the “public transcripts” of development are sustained by the powerful and the subordinate, both of whose interests lead them to “tactically conspire to misrepresent” (Scott, 1990, p.2) (2005, p.231).⁵

⁵ Here, Mosse draws on Tania Li (2000), who (in contrast to her later work foregrounding officials’ sincerity), also depicts efforts to sustain formal policy representations as a kind of wilful misrepresentation. Li’s earlier work (from 2000) foregrounds not only strategic participation, but the ‘moral accommodations’ through which actors sustain interventions they recognise as failing on their own terms (see also Sayer, 1994). She demonstrates, for example, that land is set aside for farming, which everyone knows is infertile. Moreover, despite recognising that the chosen beneficiaries are not those intended by policy, programme administrators go ahead for the sake of their own reputations, and getting their jobs done. Intended beneficiaries participate for a while because of the rice they receive rather than the prospect of becoming commercial farmers, which many already are. In *The*

This captures something of the ambivalence that characterises why people partake in projects whose outcomes are ambiguous, or fail to map onto plans, yet continue to be represented, at least officially, as success stories (or on their way there). But to describe ambivalence as conspiratorial misrepresentation is unsuitable for a setting like Atlantis, where scepticism and expectation coexist.

Here, turning to a cognate set of perspectives on developmental states is helpful. As a peculiar arm of a developmental state, the zone company is a different kind of institution from the international aid agencies and non-profit or non-governmental organisations (NGOs) of the development industry I have been discussing. Existing writing on developmental states has captured how schemes undertaken in the name of the poor are often plagued by popular scepticism – accusations of corruption or the incapacity of front-line officials – even as citizens still rely on them, and hope to benefit from them (Gupta, 2012; Mathur, 2015).⁶ Drawing on Mosse (2005), Nayanika Mathur (2015) reflects on how India’s national public sector employment programme comes officially to be represented as successful ‘on paper’, even as, in practice, involved actors are intimately aware it does not achieve its goals (see also Tarlo, 2001). Mathur demonstrates how everyday practices and ritualised procedure (spanning paperwork, meetings, and events) come to produce the ‘effects’ of a coherent state at work (see Mitchell, 1999). These effects are augmented by an affective quality of officialdom, which can be understood as a

Will to Improve, Li (2007, p.29) calls this the ‘uneasy collaborations between trustees and their target groups, and the compromised position of experts who promise improvements they cannot deliver’, and elaborates these practices as ‘looking away when rules are broken, failing to gather or to use information that undermines the linear narrative of the plan, and constructing data to demonstrate unerring “success.”’

⁶ Writing about the Indian state, Akhil Gupta (2012) explores why it is that, even as the poor are politically represented, poverty persists and does not constitute a public scandal. He argues that it is in the everyday practices of a bureaucracy – characterised by both rule-following and massive contingencies – that systematically arbitrary outcomes are produced, often with harmful consequences for the poor. He argues that these outcomes, however unintended, should be viewed as a form of structural violence.

“non-rational” underside’ (Navaro-Yashin, 2007, p.84) or as having fantastical qualities (Aretxaga, 2003). Rather than treating official representations of the policy, and the state, as misrepresentation, Mathur (2015, p.167) argues that official-seeming ‘documents and statistics possess a complicated relationship with the real... and might be – but then again, might not be – [false]’. Her interlocuters, both officials and citizens, are characterised as being in two minds. They are both sceptical of the state’s capacity to implement, and expectant that it should be able to intervene to save lives.

This thesis builds on the recognition that development interventions persist, and continue to be represented as plausible, even as individuals hold contradictory attitudes towards official scripts. The zone company, and the everyday bureaucratic activity and programmes that animate it, are also made sense of in relation to the idea of ‘the state’ and affectively charged imaginings of its developmental responsibilities – and shortcomings. This occurs even as the zone company is a more hybrid institution, straddling both public and private-sector mandates. I show how officials seek to represent it as an ‘ethical’ and even ‘caring’ corporation in line with contemporary ideals about the developmental role and superior efficacy of business (Blowfield and Dolan, 2014; Rajak, 2011). Its state-like qualities, though, remain strongly felt among Atlantis residents, who imagine it, and its officials, as offering avenues for forms of political recognition, belonging, and entitlement, which many feel is denied them, as citizens, in the wider polity.

But in Atlantis, the grappling I intend to show is not only with the fictional or fake quality of official claims about the SEZ, but rather actors’ own uncertainty about what its outcomes might still become. The zone is sustained in a condition in which it might still, truly, become a ‘success’, or, equally possible, just be another public failure.

It is precisely this condition of uncertainty – where projects are neither clearly successful nor definitively failed – that requires a distinct approach. In what follows I draw together a final field of literature geared specifically to understanding how different kinds of actors engage with, and act in relation to, uncertain futures in formalised economic situations. This has particular significance in a setting where economic policy, and many official plans, link the promise of socioeconomic improvement to investment attraction and market participation, but where expert projections of such outcomes bear little resemblance to everyday life.

Doubtful inclusion: The plausibility of market inclusion in Atlantis

Like other development projects, the Atlantis SEZ does not achieve its own goals yet continues to sustain positive representations and enrol diverse actors. This thesis shows that official representations of the zone's plausibility rest on economic calculations and projections that repeatedly fail to materialise. As a result, actors navigate between possible futures: one in which it succeeds as predicted, and another in which it does not and may already be a failure. This requires an approach that attends to both how expert narratives about the future are made compelling, and how actors engage uncertainty and doubt in their own lives. Drawing on economic anthropology and sociology, this thesis examines how development interventions are reproduced in the everyday when 'success' and 'failure' are simultaneously at stake.

In Atlantis, representations of zone success take a relatively clear and consistent narrative form: investment attraction and market inclusion facilitated by a commercially savvy yet socially responsible company, and by a proactive local population participating in community, skills, and enterprise programmes. Such horizons invoke anticipation, aspiration, and hope that Atlantis will become a hub of

sustainable market participation (see also Cross, 2015; Miyazaki, 2006; Rajak and Dolan, 2022; Ross, 2010; Weszkalnys, 2008; Weszkalnys, 2014). Yet interpretations of failure take an equally legible common form, informed by the history of the failed apartheid era zone, and a current lived reality, in which the SEZ itself has done little to alleviate unemployment and its attendant social ills.

To appreciate the persistent coexistence of ideas about success and failure in Atlantis, an understanding of economic uncertainty itself is required. Economic anthropology and sociology treats the economy as a highly complex and therefore uncertain domain (Knight, 1921) about which knowledge is necessarily only ever partial (Beunza and Garud, 2007). This has been taken as a basis to critique the certainty that economics often claims in being able to ‘fix’ all manner of socioeconomic problems (Fourcade, 2018; Fourcade, Ollion and Algan, 2015). James Carrier (2023) explores another dimension to this uncertainty. He argues that established economic thought and writing have encouraged a popular sense that the economy is incomprehensible. People are increasingly asked to ‘believe things that they do not understand’ (2023, p.55), and to have faith in claims that appear ‘only uncertainly related to their personal lives’ (2023, p.54).

To understand how official claims about economic futures are made plausible in such conditions, I will first draw on perspectives that explore precisely how different kinds of economic experts exhibit plausible certainty about an uncertain world. Rather than resting solely on calculation, projections are also sustained through affect, ethics, and socially contextual practice (for example Bear, 2020; Chong and Tuckett, 2015; Leins, 2018; Miyazaki, 2003; Zaloom, 2006). Experts’ claims to certainty may rest as much on a faith in the morality or necessity of their own actions, as on confidence in the accuracy of their models (Chong, 2018, p.130; Miyazaki, 2007).

In Atlantis, actors too draw on non-technical forms of reasoning to inform their judgements about an uncertain future, and therefore also about the present. For company officials, affectively charged ideas about social responsibility for the people of Atlantis shape their self-understandings and motivate continued efforts to present their work both as ‘ethical’, and as a credible reflection of their policy mandate. This is not driven solely by concerns such as status, job security, or professionalism, but also by ongoing engagement with the plausibility – and acknowledged uncertainty – of the ultimate viability of the project.

It is not just officials who represent plausible success. Prior to the company’s establishment, consultants were hired to calculate the economic feasibility of the zone, and made projections of investment and job creation, that later did not come true. Others have shown the important role of stories in shoring up faith in expert economic projections, guiding expectations, and directing various forms of action in the present (Holmes, 2009; 2014). As Stefan Leins (2018; 2022) shows, financial analysts persuade of their expert judgements through the creation of compelling narratives, that combine words, calculation, and visual devices like graphs (see also Chong and Tuckett, 2015). These narratives synthesise ‘market feeling’ into a persuasive account of the future, despite divergent methods and predictions. Leins (2022, p.359) says of these experts: ‘Their power does not build upon the ability to actually foresee the future, but to create stories about a potential future, which might never become real’. The authority of expert narratives, in this view, lies in the capacity to render particular futures plausible enough to guide action in the present.

But a focus on the performance and legitimation of ‘success’, amidst few tangible outcomes, risks underplaying the challenges of such an endeavour. Not all actors are equally authorised to make claims about the economy, and expert authority is fragile, contested, and unevenly distributed by class, race, and

institutional standing (for example Clift, Melhuish and Rosamond, 2025; Fourcade, 2009). Some actors' claims might be written off as 'trashy economics', when they are made by people with the wrong personal qualities (Clift, Melhuish and Rosamond, 2025). In Atlantis, zone company officials are preoccupied with needing to represent themselves and the company as capable of properly administering the zone according to available 'best practices', and consultants' advice, in a context where state officials, and state-owned enterprises, are often generically characterised as 'corrupt' and 'incompetent' (as in the Indian case described by Gupta (2012) and Mathur (2015)). Officials also battle public scrutiny towards SEZs, which questions the efficacy of their governance and criticises the 'opportunity cost' of capital spent on them, and on their staff's salaries, for minimal returns (Kurasha, 2020; Makgetla, 2021; Phiri and Manchishi, 2020; Toussaint et al., 2019). Officials' efforts to document imminent 'success', even as they themselves are uncertain, are in part attempts to ward off looming diagnoses of 'failure'.

Moreover, after so many years without anticipated results, there are other challenges entailed in sustaining the authority of 'expert' claims about the zone's potential success. How do officials and consultants sustain credibility when projections turn out to be flawed? When financial analysts make recommendations that yield losses, they shield themselves from criticism through blaming intermediaries and clients for not interpreting or following their advice properly (Leins, 2018). Jaqueline Best (2022) shows that the limits to central bankers' expertise are 'uncomfortable' to politicians and the public, who expect their knowledge to be more certain than it is (see also Rayner, 2012). They deploy strategies to conceal, or only partially reveal, the extent of their uncertainties (see also Bovensiepen and Pelkmans, 2020; McGoey, 2012). In Atlantis, while consultants do try to hide their uncertainty (Chapter 3), for officials, uncertainty can also provoke

epistemological, bureaucratic, and ethical dilemmas, which threaten their own credibility (Chapter 5).

This middle ground, in which outcomes remain undecided, offers distinct insights into the socially constructed nature of ‘success’ and ‘failure’ in practice, revealing that, when outcomes are uncertain, these categories are mobilised by specific actors for particular purposes. Officials from GreenCape (a local non-profit which had been involved in establishing the zone, but which was demoted as project partner in 2019), often take a critical approach to the way the SEZ is run by the zone company, suggesting that the project, of which they had once been highly supportive, is doomed to fail (Chapter 2). National Treasury officials question the entire SEZ scheme, in part out of presiding concerns about fiscal sustainability, for which they are responsible (Chapter 2). Some of the consultants, who had previously delivered fairly optimistic feasibility and strategy assessments, themselves make stark conclusions about the zone’s likely failure, in part to protect their own reputations (Chapter 3).

These tensions are not limited to critics; even those most invested in project success, zone company officials and many local residents, express concerns about potential failure. To capture this flip-flopping between anticipation of ‘success’, and claims about potential ‘failure’ that recur throughout this thesis, doubt is a useful framing analytic. It captures how future representations can be believed in, and questioned, at the same time, even by the same people. Taking an anthropological approach to doubt, Mathijs Pelkmans (2013, p.4) defines doubt as being in ‘two minds’ and as ‘wavering between one possibility and another. While bound up with belief, doubt also informs action, as it is through an engagement with what to believe,

that actors decide what to *do*.⁷ Pelkmans defines ‘lived doubt’ not as a scientific or systematic evaluation of what is true, but rather as affective and ethical deliberation about what is important in actors’ own lives (see also Pelkmans and Mühlfried, 2018). Across the thesis I show how, in Atlantis, actors’ evaluations of the zone’s outcomes are as much bound up in assessments of their own prospects as in any attempt at ‘objective’ evaluation. While I do not use the concept of ‘doubt’ to frame chapter arguments, doubt runs through the chapters through actors’ efforts not just to make sense of two diametrically opposed discernible potential outcomes – success and failure – but also to navigate how to act in between these, when neither is yet realised. Doubt appears through concepts and concerns specific to the practices and happenings at stake in each chapter. Doubt nonetheless remains helpful in tying these processes and concerns together.

‘Lived doubt’ is also effective to capture how those with less familiarity with and proximity to established scripts navigate a development scheme when outcomes are uncertain. This is significant because it is not just those with a stake in the authority of ‘expertise’ who participate in the everyday reproduction of the SEZ. During my fieldwork, Atlantis residents partook in various zone programmes, and their involvement was meticulously documented as evidence to substantiate official claims about a population ready for market inclusion.

Among residents, ideas about zone success are framed less by abstract policy goals, or consultant projections, than through expectations tied to post-apartheid citizenship. Success is imagined as access to jobs, entrepreneurial opportunities, and

⁷ This insight resonates with ethnographies of economic life in which actors commit to projects while simultaneously questioning their premises. Hirokazu Miyazaki’s (2007) study of Japanese traders shows how belief and doubt are intertwined in arbitrage, producing ambivalent epistemological and ethical orientations. Similarly, Gisa Weszkalnys (2016) describes how prolonged delays in offshore oil development in São Tomé and Príncipe transformed initial optimism into what she terms ‘doubtful hope’ – a stance shaped as much by expectations of failure as by anticipation of transformation.

the possibility of economic advancement, particularly for those who demonstrate willingness to invest in the zone's community, skills, and enterprise development offerings. These expectations are persistently shadowed by the possibility of failure. Residents describe having been made to wait for promised jobs and improved livelihoods, often since the 1970s (Auyero, 2011; Dawson, 2014; Janeja and Bandak, 2018; Jeffrey, 2010). Many express a feeling of having been 'left behind' (Miyazaki, 2003), or even of abjection (Ferguson, 1999), at having lost out on expected future livelihood improvements.

What characterises residents' engagements with the zone, then, is not complicity, but a dynamic, ambivalent orientation shaped by both anticipation and scepticism, based on their current lived experiences. For residents, doubt involves deliberations about how participation might be worthwhile, when diametrically opposed discernible outcomes – of market inclusion on the one hand, or continued marginalisation on the other – are both possible.

How ordinary people engage with formal economic ideas, regulations, and programmes is the subject of a cognate set of perspectives in economic anthropology (Bear et al., 2015; Breckenridge and James, 2021; Guyer, 2004; Miller, 2002; Weszkalnys, 2011). Influential here, Jane Guyer (2016, p.16) describes this as 'the life experience of living within, and trying to make sense of, assemblages largely created by others'. She argues that ordinary people are able to appropriate established concepts and infrastructures for their own purposes, what she describes as '[mining the economy] for advantage' (2016, p.4). In Atlantis, beyond anticipation of formal market incorporation, residents simultaneously see other more immediate advantages in participating in the zone in the absence of such. They pursue forms of livelihood, status, recognition, and belonging from the institution that they struggle to secure elsewhere.

Building on Guyer's approach to the formal economy, and the 'piecemeal' (2004, p.157) way it is sustained through the participation of diverse actors, others have shown how ordinary people engage with formal concepts and infrastructures in inventive and creative ways (Hull and James, 2012; James, 2011). Maxim Bolt (2021) advances the concept of 'fluctuating formality' to account for the uneven ways formal institutions shape lives, in part because of the provisional nature of actors' commitments to official scripts. He argues that the 'formal' economy is sustained to the extent that it finds practical grounding in actors' own projects.

In the penultimate three chapters of this thesis, we will see how residents' participation in the zone is conditioned on how they navigate simultaneously possible outcomes, and seek to secure various advantages, in the absence of promised certainties. Those residents elected as 'community representatives' embrace success narratives to claim professional status and remuneration (Chapter 4). Those not elected describe representatives as willingly co-opted into a scheme that seems to 'fail' those who do not have such privileged roles. The zone's skills development programme is imagined as a pathway to employment, even as it is viewed as a more pragmatic and immediate source of recognition, and of advantageous personal relationships, precisely in the absence of wages (Chapter 5). Finally, entrepreneurial identities demonstrate an apparent commitment to formalised market participation, even as they provide the basis for claims on more immediately available public resources. Across these schemes, residents are encouraged to devote their time, energy, and personal resources to this uncertain programme, and, even as they might secure small gains, they are ultimately left precarious, and most without meaningful avenues out of long-term unemployment.

It is through bringing together a focus on how 'expert', official, and ordinary project 'beneficiaries' make decisions about how to act when unsure about the future,

that the persistence of this development intervention can be understood. This approach illuminates how actors' fluctuating orientations to the zone are conditioned by their assessments of their vastly different prospects, and by their own projects. Expert and official assessments of, and engagements with, the zone are rooted as much in their career and personal objectives, as in apparently certain projections. Project 'beneficiaries' have their own diverse reasons for partaking, informed by efforts to get by, and to make post-apartheid citizenship meaningful. It is precisely through these projects, grounded in actors' own lives and careers, that the zone continues to be sustained in practice. It does not emerge as a case of official 'success'. Yet, neither has it collapsed into recognisable 'failure', or project termination. The zone keeps going as an SEZ *in the making*. Thus, we see how the promise of market inclusion remains plausible amidst chronic long-term unemployment.

Tying my contribution together, this thesis reorients the study of SEZs away from a primary focus on labour exploitation and toward an analysis of zones as institutionalised solutions to unemployment. It asks how the Atlantis SEZ persists even as it does not generate meaningful formalised market participation as intended. This persistence cannot be explained by hidden interests in capital accumulation as per earlier Marxist explanations; nor, as per later Foucauldian explanations for development failure, without the intelligent participation of a range of actors. Instead, the thesis argues that understanding participation in the zone requires sustained analytical attention to how diverse actors engage the interval between 'failure' and 'success' in development, when both diagnoses are at stake. The zone retains plausibility, not as a resounding 'success', but neither as a declared 'failure', because diverse actors continue to navigate this middle ground – publishing evidence of progress, preparing for economic opportunities that may never

materialise, and pursuing unevenly accessible advantages in the absence of settled outcomes.

Becoming a zone company official

This thesis draws on ethnographic fieldwork, supported by over seventy in-depth interviews, and archival research. I conducted fieldwork by working as a hired member of staff for the zone company: seven months in and around the offices from March 2022, and five online, to fulfil a twelve-month contract. Conducting ethnographic fieldwork as a paid member of staff enabled me to observe not only how the zone operates, but how claims to its ‘success’ are produced through everyday practices, documents, and interactions. But proximity to ‘expertise’ and to officialdom – to those who claimed these, and to the performances through which they were enacted – played a role in shaping how people perceived me, how I could travel through an opaque institution and even beyond it, and the kinds of relationships I built.

This was in part because the company was a setting characterised by a profound preoccupation with projecting its own expertise, a constituent feature of the plausibility of its ‘success’ claims. In the very first email exchange I had with the Chief Executive Officer (CEO), Johan, in late 2021, he expressed that the company ‘had a very ambitious strategic plan that really makes the Atlantis SEZ project a very different animal to other SEZs in South Africa’. I had reached out to him via email, explaining that I wanted to conduct ethnographic fieldwork in the company. I foregrounded my educational credentials as the kind of early career professional who was sincerely interested in the work at the zone company on its own terms: I have an economics honours degree from the University of Cape Town, and some prior

experience in economic policy work. While I explained that my project was interdisciplinary, critical, and drawing on ethnographic methods, what Johan seemed to take away from my introduction was that I was an ‘economist’. The response was telling: ‘No one wants to write a PhD that sits on a shelf’. If I was going to research the zone, I could offer my expertise, and get mentorship, from the zone officials as a ‘research and technical assistant’ or ‘embedded researcher’. I was to be one of two PhD students working for the company at the time (the other an engineer studying net zero water plans), both understood to be making real the zone’s ‘strong connections to universities’ – indeed as evidence of its role in forging ‘knowledge ecosystems’ for the green economy, as per existing strategy plans and best practice for successful SEZs.

At one level, participating as an employee offered specific methodological advantages. Beyond observing office life, and relying on my interlocutors’ interpretations of their work, I was engaged in producing the documents, processes, and events that made up the organisation’s daily functioning, and constituted its official representations (Knox, 2005; Mosse, 2005). My role entailed attending staff meetings and spending time replying to emails or drafting and commenting on company and consultant reports. But the monotony of everyday working life was frequently punctuated by, and even organised around, more spectacular occasions and events. As the company had two offices – one in Cape Town’s Central Business District and one in the industrial area of Atlantis – I often commuted between both, and further afield, to attend important meetings and celebrations with local, provincial, and national government officials. These were always accompanied by pomp and ceremony, and an explicit emphasis from executives on needing to ‘make a good impression’. Most of my time, though, was spent in the Atlantis offices, from where I could study, and partake in, the work of preparing people for markets, and

observe residents' own participation. Here also events like skills graduations, or community stakeholder meetings, stood out as significant occasions where our everyday office work was seen to 'be paying off' in more visible displays of company 'progress'.

I quickly began to perceive how my role as paid employee might also pose methodological challenges. Where the boundaries between ethnographic and other forms of 'expert' knowledge are always unstable (Holmes and Marcus, 2005; Riles, 2006), implicating anthropologists in the systems of knowledge they seek to study, the methodological demands of participant observation in a knowledge-intensive institution played on those boundaries in specific ways. Signing the contract entailed drawing boundaries around 'intellectual property'. I had to amend clauses to distinguish company knowledge (which I could not publish without permission) from my own data collection. While this distinction is of course precarious – as my own ethnographic work sought in part to make company knowledge its subject – it was workable because the kinds of details I sought to capture often overflowed the frame which many of my interlocutors deemed 'relevant' information (Mosse, 2006).

In meetings I simultaneously took minutes in the formal register of an employee and scribbled fieldnotes on tone, gestures, and setting. Colleagues asked, 'What are you even writing down?' and I would have to explain I was writing down what they had just said, even if it was an off-hand remark, or increasingly laugh off the question because after a while they knew the answer. This prompted different kinds of reactions, some clearly uncomfortable with feeling scrutinised and others curious to learn more about the nature of ethnographic research itself. Taking fieldnotes sometimes became an awkward exercise in official settings, and I quickly learnt when it was better *not to* and instead to try to remember important details to note down later, if appropriate at all.

This posed ethical implications. I had been given consent by the CEO and executives, and while the rest of the staff seemed content enough with my presence, getting substantive consent on an individual basis remained important. Early in my fieldwork I copied the entire staff complement in an email where I explained that, with their consent, they might become ‘characters’ in my study, and I might quote them. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the executives were more willing to give full consent than front-line staff, in part because they were more acclimatised to being publicly quoted, and they appeared more confident in their professional roles and abilities. But of the front-line officials with whom I spent the most time, while some did not give me consent (and they are not described in what follows), others were excited to tell me what their character names should be. In this thesis, all the names of cited individuals have been changed, except for high profile national government officials. In some cases composite characters are used to further preserve anonymity.

Doing fieldwork as a hired professional also affected how I made relationships. It meant navigating shared work tasks and the expectations of normal professional behaviour, as well as transgressing these norms. Colleagues often thought of me as a ‘colleague’ or ‘intern’ first, which meant I could not always play the ‘outsider’ licensed to ask ‘childlike questions’, sometimes a technique anthropologists, in particular young women, use when studying elites (Mathur, 2015). It also meant I needed to proactively request access to meetings and workstreams beyond those officially assigned to me. While this was sometimes awkward, colleagues mostly agreed, telling of their pro-research attitude. Johan once explained to a room of officials from the City that I was there as an ‘Oxford researcher’, but also because ‘I was a very pushy lady’ – a joke that nonetheless captured the way I had to proactively navigate organisational norms. Johan laughed

and added, ‘That’s why she fits so well into the culture of our organisation’, referring to his sense that the company had to battle for government funding and support.

Talk of the ‘culture’ of the organisation belied certain socioeconomic rifts therein. Officials commuted to work from different environments, and executives earned more than front-line staff, roughly a third of whom were from Atlantis. The majority commuted from Bloubergstrand, a small beachside town twenty minutes away, or from Cape Town. I lived in Bloubergstrand partly due to safety concerns, since Atlantis faces high levels of gang-related violence, especially at night. While it might be tempting to assume that the commuting patterns, and the socioeconomic make-up of the company, mapped onto apartheid legacies of space- and race-based inequality, this was not neatly the case. While the executive body was disproportionately White, overall the company was extremely racially and culturally diverse, with officials hailing originally from all over the country, often having had successful careers in government, corporations, and non-profits.

Socioeconomic differences were more pronounced between officials and residents, of whom many were unemployed and of the impression that professional roles were reserved for ‘outsiders’. Events often reinforced this sense of separation, taking place in securitised venues with guarded parking. If less pronounced among the diversity of my colleagues, my positionality – as company staff and as a White woman – was more visible in Atlantis, among African and Coloured residents. Some residents warned me that ‘Atlantis people don’t like White people’, while others insisted research would be easy because ‘everyone wants to talk to a White lady’. While my race surely affected how people perceived me, engagements were shaped by diverse motives. One person wanted me to ‘get the story of Atlantis out into the world’; another enjoyed the social kudos of befriending ‘an Oxford person’ and often posted pictures of us together on Facebook. Such dynamics reflect the ‘extraversion’

of social practice in a place where people are keen to expand social networks (see also Bayart, 2000; Prince, 2015). Over time I built relationships by clarifying that I was a researcher first, official second. Beyond work settings, I spent more time socialising with residents than company staff, kept up relationships via WhatsApp, and attended informal gatherings and celebrations on weekends (for which my basic proficiency in Afrikaans was often helpful, especially among Coloured residents, for whom Afrikaans is a first language).

Interviews were a key means to probe further what differently positioned actors, with varying proximity to expert assessments and policy, thought about the zone, and its schemes. With both officials and residents, conversations often began like job interviews, as people recounted career paths or struggles to find work, and often repeated in familiar, abstract terms the zone's *raison d'être* – partly reflecting the institutionalised settings of many of our encounters. As interviews developed, I emphasised that I was interested in their own ideas and motivations. Here I witnessed actors 'in two minds': within a single conversation actors would swing between strong expressions of hope and confidence in the zone, and more ambivalent or even sceptical commentary. As Pelkmans (2013, p.5) theorises, 'doubt tends to vanish with articulation': actors express opinions in one moment that appear fixed, but these may be expressed differently, or even contradicted, in another. Interviews, when combined with long term fieldwork, allowed me to capture the fluctuating nature of people's ideas about the zone, crucially also in relation to their own actions. Such an ethnographic approach to lived doubt enabled me to better understand my informants' efforts to navigate a setting 'that is only partly knowable' (Pelkmans, 2013, p.32).

Interviews also helped reconstruct the institutional history of the zone, supplemented by archival work. Conversations with national, provincial, and local

government officials, consultants, and other stakeholders offered insights into the production of early feasibility studies and strategy documents for the SEZ. Archival research at the National Library and the University of Cape Town's Government Publications Archive provided material on prior interventions in the region, though many original Atlantis planning documents were destroyed in a tragic fire at the university in 2021. I accessed further information on industrial decentralisation and policy on Cape Coloured populations, which frequently reference unemployment and competing policy remedies, through existing historical literature.

This brings me to a final set of reflections on the ethical stakes of conducting fieldwork as a paid employee in this context: payment itself. Being remunerated for my contributions muddied a genuine intention to 'give back' in exchange for what otherwise might have been an extractive exercise, as research often is (see also Knox, 2005). Yet my salary, which was an entailment of my formal role, also implicated me in the very distributional and status politics at the core of this thesis. I was able to draw on scarce public resources because of my perceived professionalism and expertise, while unemployed residents' contributions went unpaid on the grounds that they lacked these. At the same time, as someone with resources, I became the object of claims: people asked for lifts, food, or jobs. While I yielded to some claims on an interpersonal basis, I had to clarify that I could offer nothing substantive in return for their participation in my research.

In sum, entering the field as a professional gave me privileged access to an otherwise opaque institution, but also implicated me in the realities I aim to critique. While my focus on uncertainty and doubt departs from the optimism of official reports, my account is nonetheless entangled in the social world I depict, and the 'truth' or value of my contribution is up for contention there (Holmes and Marcus, 2005; Riles, 2006). In a context where positive representations, and even 'spectacle'

are designed to attract investment (Tsing, 2000) and perhaps more significantly, to sustain political support and funding, a refusal to comply with authorised interpretations risks being read as ‘anti-social’ (Mosse, 2006). Inasmuch as this thesis does not aim to celebrate project achievements, neither does it aim to evaluate policy, to predict the future, or to constitute the most ‘up to date’ analysis of the SEZ, as economic and some social scientific knowledge is so often anxious to do (Knorr Cetina, 2010; Leins, 2022; Miyazaki, 2003). Rather, taking an ethnographic approach to one intervention, it traces how expert projections, policy scripts, and plans are interpreted, and what gets done in their name, in the doubtful and often conflict-ridden realities of everyday practice. The hope is that we might think more critically about the persistence of market inclusion ideals in the organisation of lives and livelihoods amidst persistent chronic unemployment.



Figure 1: Map of Atlantis, 40kms from the Cape Town CBD (GreenCape, 2016, p.3)

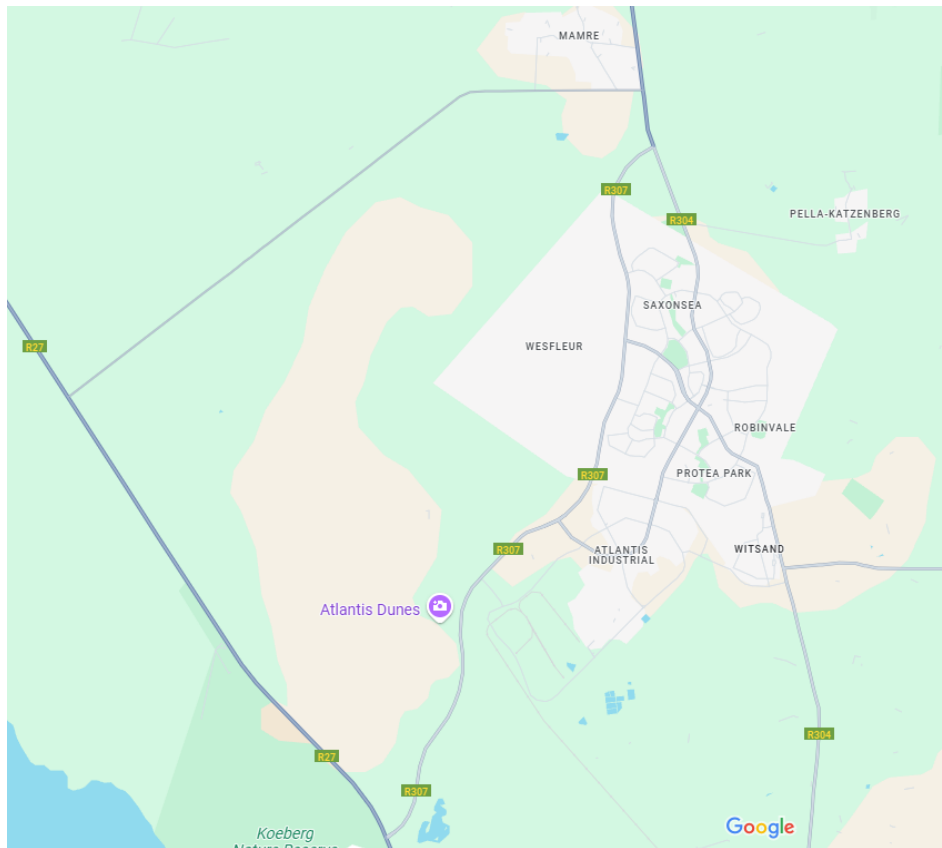


Figure 2: Map of Atlantis, including Atlantis, Mamre, Pella, and Witsand (Google Maps)

Outline of the thesis

The thesis begins by situating the Atlantis SEZ in a longer history of public interventions aiming to put the unemployed to work in the region, shaped by the developments of racial capitalism. **Chapter 1** examines how a field of intervention emerged around ‘Coloured unemployment’, with roots in the early twentieth century. Drawing on archival material and historical literature, I show how the ‘problem’, and its myriad solutions, were given shape by shifting political projects, changing ‘scientific’ knowledge about race, and shifting methods of managing labour markets. Where Coloured unemployment was initially made sense of vis-à-vis existing concerns with ‘poor Whites’, the problem later gained political traction in the context of another more prominent political priority: dealing with urban African unemployment through industrial decentralisation. Ultimately, none of these

interventions were deemed successful in alleviating unemployment in this group, yet their repeated failures, and enduring effects, continue to shape post-apartheid Atlantis and the SEZ.

Chapter 2 turns to the SEZ directly, examining the zone company charged with managing it, and the wider political struggles that shaped its peculiar institutional form. In a context marked by fiscal conservatism, and pervasive scepticism about the developmental capacity of the post-apartheid state, I show how officials draw on the ideals, language, and frameworks of ‘ethical business’ to imagine and defend the plausibility of institutional ‘success’, and to ward off doubts about possible ‘failure’. I argue that the adoption of business practices within the state extends beyond well-studied concerns with efficiency and transparency. Rather, the adoption of *ethical* business repertoires lends renewed plausibility to public interventions claiming to address long-standing social problems like unemployment, rearticulated in the language of ‘social responsibility’.

Building on this, **Chapter 3** then explores the role of consultants in devising ‘expert’ calculations and narratives about the zone’s investment and job creation prospects. Through an investigation of how consultants defend their own work after their claims have failed to come true, I show that consultants’ evaluations of the zone’s fate are rooted as much in technical calculation as in their own attempts at shoring up legitimacy in a competitive industry, where they are expected to mediate between imperatives to provide technical certainty, and to make an ‘impact’. Drawing on existing studies of management consultants to business and public administration, this chapter therefore contributes a focus on the structural role consultants play in shoring up the credibility of public development interventions, even as they themselves are uncertain about their outcomes.

The thesis focuses in the greatest detail on the zone company's programmes to prepare the local unemployed population for markets, exploring how these are sustained in practice in the absence of promised market opportunities, and why officials and residents continue to take part. **Chapter 4** examines how the zone's community participation scheme sustains representations of the zone's 'social licence to operate' even as it is defined in practice by conflicts among officials, participants themselves, and other residents, over its key terms. Building on perspectives on market inclusion and on volunteering, the chapter argues that this scheme depends for its reproduction on the enrolment of new kinds of precarious labour – as participants are recruited to donate their time, effort, and personal resources to the cause, in the process losing social status amongst peers, and gaining little materially.

Chapter 5 shows how the company's programme to prepare a skilled labour force for the green economy according to market demand in practice comes to rest on intertwined struggles for recognition. Skills officials seek recognition of their credibility as specialists by building a database attesting to the creation of a skilled labour force. Residents, meanwhile, seek recognition, not just of their existing skills by prospective employers, but of their worth as persons by the zone company itself. In the absence of promised wage work to render skill meaningful, the chapter demonstrates how skills development amidst unemployment is sustained by a distinct kind of moral economy. Herein, officials see their responsibilities towards residents as extending beyond their stipulated performance criteria, and residents in turn make demands on officials to assist them to get by in the continuing absence of promised wages.

Finally, **Chapter 6** turns to the zone's enterprise development scheme, examining efforts to formalise small businesses in Atlantis in the lead up to a publicly funded construction project. The chapter shows how, in a context with few

opportunities for market participation, formalisation comes to centre on struggles over access to public resources. I argue that the appearance of economic formality is sustained not purely through commitments to the ideals of meritocratic market participation, but also through the strategic engagement of different actors who recognise the potential fragility of the rules of the formal economy. Officials work to render the rules of the upcoming construction widely recognised to prevent later violent disruption by unruly claimants who feel excluded, while entrepreneurs enact commitments to formalisation in part to entrench what they view as their own entitlements. Together, these actors work to render public distribution recognisable as rule-bound to contain conflict over access to public resources – thereby sustaining the orderly conditions under which future private investment and market participation in the SEZ can remain plausible.

Taken together, these chapters offer a social explanation for how and why diverse actors participate in sustaining the official plausibility of an intervention that claims to be able to address chronic unemployment through the market, but does not do so, against a backdrop of similar failed efforts. The thesis argues that it is in paying attention to how actors navigate the uncertain ‘success’ of this market inclusion scheme, and the more immediate lived experience of its failure, that the production of official plausibility can be understood. It is not through an inevitable logic of capital, nor through the uncritical adoption of technocratic knowledge that this intervention is sustained. Rather it is through a doubtful engagement with official and expert claims about the future, and the meanings actors make of these in their own lives, that dignity and resources continue to be organised in such an unequal way.

Chapter 1

A century of failed efforts to solve the problem of Coloured unemployment

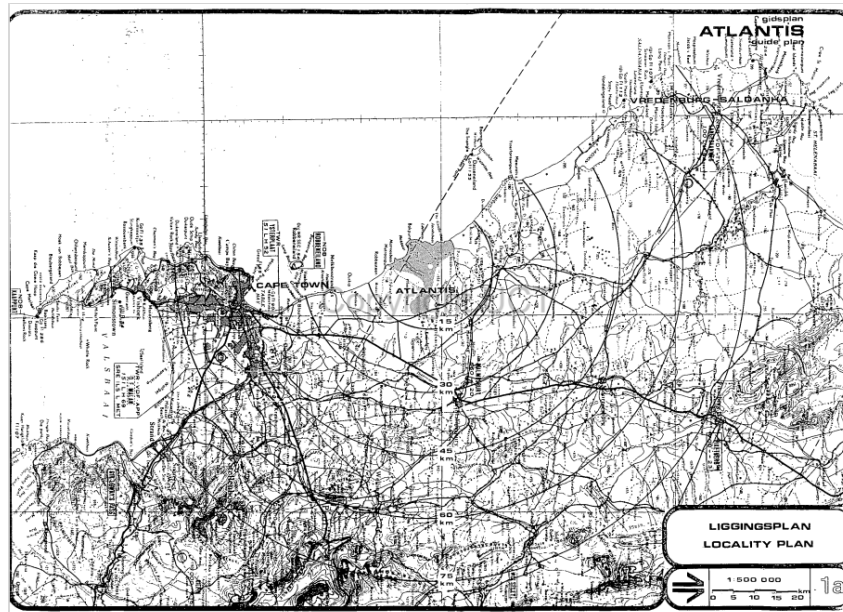


Figure 3: Planning for Atlantis (Du Toit, 1982)

While post-apartheid discourse often advances a teleology of democratic transition as historical rupture, a substantial body of scholarship has instead emphasised the continuities that link democratic South Africa to earlier regimes (Hart, 2002; Marais, 1998; Scully, 2019; Seekings and Nattrass, 2005). This thesis is concerned with one such continuity: the longstanding preoccupation with wage labour, and economic productivity more broadly, in organising lives and livelihoods. Even as the colonial and apartheid regimes faced poverty and unemployment in response to the rise of industrialisation, the solutions primarily focussed on securing access to, and protections in, the labour market. Provision outside the labour market remained residual and falls beyond the scope of this thesis: welfare measures, beginning with the means-tested national social pension introduced for White workers (and, to a

significantly lesser degree, Coloured workers) in 1928, functioned primarily as a last-resort safety net for those deemed unable to work (Scully, 2019; Seekings, 2007).

This chapter situates the Atlantis SEZ within this longer preoccupation with using labour markets to address unemployment. The SEZ is the most recent in a series of public interventions in regional labour markets, particularly targeting the Coloured population, which largely fell short on their own terms. To understand how such initiatives were rationalised, how they gained political traction, and why they recurred despite repeated failures, the chapter traces the historical emergence of a field of intervention around Coloured unemployment.

This requires apprehending economic phenomena, like unemployment, as political (see also Roitman, 2005). Timothy Mitchell (1995; 1998) invites us to consider how the economy is not a natural or preexisting material domain, but rather emerged as a distinct field of intervention through the rise of new forms of knowledge and statistical techniques. From this perspective, economic problems do not exist independently of the practices that render them visible and actionable. More generally, scholarship on the rise of fields of social improvement – of which interventions around unemployment are one instance – demonstrates that conceptualisations of ‘problems’ do not simply reflect an underlying reality. Rather, such conceptualisations actively help to constitute that reality, rendering particular populations, conditions, and relations intelligible and therefore governable. Once a field becomes stabilised, it supplies the repertoires of knowledge, expertise, and practices through which both the definition of a problem and the range of plausible solutions become readily available, and even thinkable (Ferguson, 1994; Li, 2005; Li, 2007).

As Tania Li (2005) and others emphasise, interventions rarely emerge fully formed from a single source of intention or interest. Rather, they take shape as a

‘contingent lash-up’ (Rose, 1999, p.276) of diverse actors, ideas, institutional arrangements, and forms of knowledge, assembled over time. Fields of intervention therefore have uneven and unpredictable trajectories: techniques devised to address a problem in one historical moment, or context, may later be taken up for different purposes, contested, recombined, or redeployed, such that their origins become obscured from view (for example DuBois, 1991; Moore and Vaughan, 1994). The apparent coherence of a field is thus always provisional, produced through partial stabilisation rather than through consistent design.

Fields of expert knowledge and intervention, despite appearances of authority and technical mastery, also exercise only limited control over the worlds they seek to govern (Mitchell, 2002). A recurrent feature of improvement interventions is the ‘gap’ between design and outcomes (Mosse, 2005). Anthropologists and historians have demonstrated how improvement schemes in the Global South and elsewhere have often been mired in confusion and administrative chaos. Studies of the contemporary developmental state in India, for example, have shown that aspirations to modern governmental capacity – such as in the delivery of welfare or public works – often fail on their own terms because of the dilemmas involved in everyday bureaucracy and paperwork (Gupta, 2012; Mathur, 2015). In South Africa, Keith Breckenridge (2005) has shown how the apartheid state’s infamous ‘Dompas’ (personal identification) system, meant to underpin simplified, centralised control of African populations, was shaped by administrative failures. The process of collecting fingerprints was extremely slow, in part due to a shortage of staff capacity, confusion at the frontline, and ‘the chaos of registering the thinly-scattered, mobile populations in the countryside’ (2005, p.96). Moreover, the final documents, meant to be resistant to tampering, were susceptible in practice to faking and forgery.

The key point for this chapter is not that schemes aiming to solve socioeconomic ‘problems’ fail. Rather, it is that schemes are generated within historically contingent fields of intervention that continue to attract political support, institutional commitment, and funding even in the face of disagreement, confusion, and repeated setbacks. Taking this lead, the chapter explores the rise of a field of intervention around Coloured unemployment, constituted differently over time, against emerging conceptualisations both of what it meant to be ‘Coloured’, and against dominant approaches to dealing with unemployment through labour markets. It does so by focusing on a series of key moments. The account begins with a national Commission of Inquiry into the Cape Coloured Population in the 1930s (whose origins are traced back to the 1890s); it offers a spotlight on the development of a Coloured Affairs Department in the 1950s and the Coloured Labour Preference Area instituted from 1955; and it ends with the 1970s design, development, and ultimate failure of the apartheid-era industrial zone to create mass employment in Atlantis. I show how this field took shape on the fringes of existing official and public concerns, garnering support and resources in ad hoc and largely contested ways.

The chapter, therefore, also offers an historical contextualisation of the contemporary Atlantis SEZ, which emerged on the back of these earlier ‘solutions’ to unemployment and their failures, particularly the apartheid-era industrial zone, and the rise of market-led economic planning more generally.⁸ Initial solutions to unemployment – like labour bureaus or public works programmes – aimed to connect people to work directly. But from the 1970s in South Africa, following global trends, dominant solutions to unemployment entailed the creation of new jobs by the private sector, and through economic growth. That meant a new preoccupation with

⁸ SEZs are a particular hybrid-genre of market-led development, in that they entail state planning and spending, but are aimed to catalyse market-driven, private-sector investment, and market participation.

private sector demand and investment, about which state agencies were expected to acquire new knowledge, but over which they had less direct control. Market-led job creation continues to be the dominant solution to unemployment in the present, and its logic, and inherent uncertainties, inform the operation of the Atlantis SEZ.

As explained in the introduction to this thesis, the definition of ‘Coloured’ (as distinct from White and African) emerged in popular parlance in the Cape in the late nineteenth century, in relation to questions of employment and livelihoods. While popularly understood even in scholarly accounts into the twentieth century as ‘mixed race’ (Macmillan and Philip, 1927; Marais, 1939), more contemporary historiography traces the origins of the group also to a shared class position. After the abolition of slavery, freed slaves, indigenous Khoisan, and mixed race ‘bastards’ came to occupy a similar position as landless skilled and semi-skilled proletarians. This group came to share not only socioeconomic status, but also identity, and a working-class variation of the dominant Afrikaner culture, as a result of their common position at the lower ranks of Cape colonial society (Newton-King, 1980; Trapido, 1980).

That their racial identity was tied inextricably to their working-class status helps, in part, to explain why their later unemployment came to be seen as a ‘problem’ in official diagnoses, and why Coloured people came to be represented – by certain experts, mostly in the Cape – as entitled to state support in securing employment. But, as this chapter will show, official understandings of Coloured unemployment were equally shaped by longstanding racist stereotypes, which rendered their status as workers more ambiguous, and complicated the forms of support to which they were deemed entitled. Coloured people were often cast as ‘indolent’ and unwilling to work compared to ‘industrious’ poor Whites, and as physically weak – though sometimes described as naturally more skilled – compared to Africans. As a result, the problem of Coloured unemployment came to be defined

in relation to ideas of their 'natural' middling position within the racial and labour-market hierarchy, understood vis-à-vis those positioned above and below them. The meanings attached to their status as workers were therefore heavily contested and stabilised only provisionally under apartheid's more aggressive modernist project of racial definition and segregation.

Existing historiography on Coloured populations in South Africa in the twentieth century has yet to train sustained focus on the official problematic of Coloured unemployment through time. Existing general accounts of Coloured history focus on Coloured political organisation (Abrahams, 1984; Adhikari, 1993; Lewis, 1987; Saks, 1991; Van der Ross, 1986), the co-construction of the race group through state intervention and political agency (Goldin, 1987), and on Coloured identity, status, and assimilation in a cultural and political context (Adhikari, 2005; 2006; 2009a; Giliomee, 1995b; Patterson, 1953; Watson, 1970). These accounts, alongside studies focussed on labour markets and specific policies – like the Civilised Labour and Coloured Labour Preference Area policies described in detail in this chapter (Goldin, 1984a; 1984b; Humphries, 1989; Shifrin, 1962; van Duin, 1989) – provide useful insights into the topic of Coloured unemployment, which I tie together, and supplement, in constructing this account.

As this chapter will demonstrate, interventions to address Coloured unemployment can only be understood with reference to other, more established fields of intervention: the problems of White poverty and African unemployment. The 'poor White' problem, and the question of the 'deservingness' of 'civilised' people, emerged as a matter of national political priority at the end of the 1800s, and was the major official rubric through which questions of Coloured poverty and unemployment were assessed and treated into the 1920s and 1930s. Later, in an effort to bolster employment creation under the Coloured Labour Preference Area

during apartheid, the field derived further resources and political momentum when tacked on to the national industrial decentralisation scheme which was designed originally to create employment for Africans near, and later inside, rural reserves which came to be known as Bantustans.

Yet studies of the rise of interventions for ‘poor Whites’ (for example Bundy, 1984; Giliomee, 2002; Seekings, 2007; Seekings, 2008a), and of later industrial decentralisation for Africans (discussed already in the thesis introduction), tend only to mention the implications for Coloured people in passing. This chapter draws from these separate bodies of literature, combined with archival research into official reports and commissions of inquiry, to construct its account.⁹ The chapter does not purport to be a comprehensive account of the nature of Coloured unemployment, nor even of all state efforts aimed at addressing it. Indeed, it excludes a focus on the early development of South Africa’s welfare regime; in part because, as mentioned, this in itself was designed primarily as a backstop for more active labour market protections, and largely excluded the working-aged and able-bodied (Scully, 2019). This account aims instead to provide a spotlight on some prominent historical examples that demonstrate the rise of a distinct field of intervention geared to putting Coloured people to work. That field was shaped by changing approaches to unemployment, and shifting logics about civilisation and deservingness, crisscrossing economic, racial, and moral rubrics.

Existing historical literature on Coloured history and politics tends to treat interventions aimed at Coloured welfare as a farce on the part of the colonial and apartheid states, in part because of their failures on their own terms to alleviate

⁹ I draw specifically on several commissions of inquiry reports into unemployment (1920s) and on Coloured populations (from 1937 and 1976), and the Annual Reports of what became the Department for Coloured Relations and Rehoboth Affairs (from 1952 to 1975). I also draw on the available planning reports, and on newspaper articles, about the development of Atlantis (although much of this material was lost in a fire that destroyed archives at the University of Cape Town).

Coloured poverty and unemployment (see for example Goldin, 1987; Lewis, 1987). The failures of these schemes are treated as evidence of the insincerity of ‘the state’ and the National Party towards Coloured people. These schemes are read as the result of a grand plan on the part of the state over time: to create the impression that officials cared about Coloured socioeconomic improvement (when they did not), to win their vote, and to undermine a united Black opposition.¹⁰ By contrast, this chapter hopes to show that, in part because of its marginal status vis-à-vis more prominent interventions into White and African unemployment, the field of Coloured unemployment was characterised by ambiguities of meaning and lacked comprehensive political support.

These interventions, and their failures, nevertheless had oftentimes terrible effects on the lives of generations of Coloured people. A series of racist political regimes controlled, among other things, where people could live and what skills they could acquire and perform in the labour market. While contemporary perspectives treat structural unemployment as a phenomenon emerging in the 1970s (Ferguson, 2015), this account shows how Coloured populations were rendered structurally ‘surplus’ much earlier than that – due to the socially and politically enforced racial segregation of labour markets. The myriad schemes to address this did little to alleviate its effects and provided few meaningful livelihood alternatives. In the case of Atlantis, the project of moving people to a remote region with few economic opportunities further set the terms of the chronic unemployment that would unfold here in the post-apartheid era. This chapter then, as well as providing historical context for the problem the SEZ is supposed to treat, helps to set out the background

¹⁰ Coloured people with property and of a certain income could vote under the Cape’s non-racial franchise system – until successive segregationist and apartheid laws (beginning with the Representation of Natives Act of 1936 and culminating in the Separate Representation of Voters Act of 1951, enforced in 1956) systematically removed their voting rights and placed them on a segregated roll.

that informs contemporary actors' scepticism that the SEZ may just be another failed state intervention.

The origins of a distinct field concerned with Coloured unemployment

Coloured unemployment emerged as a field of specialised knowledge and intervention in its own right in the late 1930s, through the establishment of a 'Commission of Inquiry Regarding the Cape Coloured Population of the Union' in 1934, known as the Wilcocks Commission after its chair, Professor R. W. Wilcocks. Despite growing awareness that Coloured populations had long been suffering poverty and unemployment, this problem had yet to be treated as a matter of unique importance, and of 'scientific' investigation. Indeed, the Wilcocks Commission lamented that Coloured people had only been given 'passing reference' in existing commission reports, and that 'hitherto the Coloured people have not been the subject of a comprehensive investigation by government'.¹¹ The Commission officially characterised the issue as the erosion of the Coloured population's traditional middling position in the labour market. Central to the inquiry, therefore, were two linked questions that would recur in subsequent policy debates: the nature of Coloured unemployment in its own right, and whether Coloured people ought to be afforded the same 'civilised' standard of living as Whites.

In the early 1930s, in the lead up to the Wilcocks Commission, perceived rising poverty and unemployment among Coloured populations had attracted the attention of both Coloured activists and White liberals, mostly Anglican clergy and university academics (Lewis, 1987, pp.150-152). This was in the context of the Great Depression and of fears about the consequences of rising segregationist sentiment in

¹¹ R. Wilcocks, *Report of the Commission of Inquiry Regarding the Cape Coloured Population of the Union* (Pretoria: Government Printer, 1937), UCT Libraries, G 68 EUG 54/1937, 32.

government under the newly merged United Party (after the 1933-34 union between Smuts' South African Party and Hertzog's National Party). In response, Coloured and White activists in Cape Town and elsewhere formed Coloured-European Councils, which sought practical governmental reforms grounded in 'scientific' investigations of social welfare. In 1934, these Councils successfully pressed the national government to appoint a Commission of Inquiry into the socio-economic conditions of Coloured populations.

The Commission must also be located in the post-World War I context, when sociology, economics, and public health were becoming professionalised disciplines globally, supplying new techniques – such as surveys, statistics, and case studies – for measuring poverty and unemployment. Commissions of inquiry drew on this expanding repertoire of 'scientific' expertise to gather data and legitimate social reform, in line with a post-war vision of state-led social and economic upliftment (Dubow, 2006; Posel, 2005).

The Wilcocks Commission drew on interviews and surveys taken across the country to diagnose the problem of Coloured unemployment as the product of a changing industrial structure in South Africa. African urban migration due to the mineral revolution (from 1867) and the rise of urban industry, coupled with the rising immigration of well-trained European artisans to South Africa, was said to be squeezing the Coloured population out of their 'natural' position in low-, semi-, and some high- skill trades. European immigrants who had completed apprenticeships in Britain or elsewhere were seen as highly qualified men, compared to Coloured artisans who had learnt on the job (van Duin, 1989, p.98). In the construction sector in the Cape – traditionally dominated by Coloured artisans – recently arrived European stonemasons responded to a contracting labour market during the South African War (1899-1902) by forming closed-shop unions that excluded all 'Non-

Europeans' (Simons and Simons, 1983, pp.74-76; Trapido, 1970, p.399). By 1904, Coloured bricklayers had been excluded from major building projects. Similarly, immigrant craftsmen in emerging trades such as jewellery-making, optics, electrical work, metallurgy, and engineering reserved apprenticeships for White youth, relegating Coloured apprentices to less prestigious trades such as blacksmithing and coach-driving.

The Commission explained this in the following terms:

From the time of the importation of slaves, beginning in the early days of settlement in the Cape, most of the unskilled and a large part of the skilled labour was performed by Coloured persons... Such labour has largely come to be looked on as their natural occupation.¹²

The report went on:

The Coloured man is now beset on two sides; on the one by the Native who competes with him at a lower wage; on the other by the European who is able to influence their position in such a manner as to exclude the Coloured man from various avenues of employment which he had been able to pursue before.¹³

The report goes on to explain this problem in terms of existing racial stereotypes of Coloured people vis-à-vis 'Natives' (Africans) and 'Europeans' (Whites). For example, while Coloured people were seen as naturally inclined towards low- and semi-skill work, this chafed against other racist ideas about Africans as having more brute physical strength to perform such work:

There is a consensus of opinion among employers of labour that the Native is on the average superior in physique to the Cape Coloured, and that in consequence he is better able to stand the strain of hard manual labour. For these and other reasons

¹² Wilcocks, *Report of the Commission of Inquiry*, 1937, 32.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 33.

employers often prefer to employ the Native as labourer, even when they are able to obtain the Cape Coloured at the same wage.¹⁴

That Coloured people were being pushed out of the labour market on both sides was a problem because it meant the Coloured person could not reach their expected 'civilised' standard of living, in relation to Whites. The report explained that most Coloured people believed they were entitled to a 'European' standard of living:

It has been emphasised to the commission in all parts of the country that most of the social disabilities under which the Coloured section suffer are caused by the poor economic conditions under which they are compelled to live. The Coloured people contend that their intimate association with the European, and the fact that in many instances they are of European descent inspire them to endeavour to attain to the same standard of living as the European, but this ambition is frustrated by the distinction often made in wages and the curtailment of opportunities for employment.¹⁵

The Wilcocks Commission established Coloured unemployment as a distinct object of state concern, defined by the erosion of a racialised middling position in the labour market. By locating unemployment within comparative racial hierarchies, the Commission linked economic exclusion to questions of 'civilisation', without resolving the ambiguity of Coloured labour's status in these terms. It is this problem-definition that later interventions would repeatedly inherit, rework, and ultimately fail to stabilise.

'Civilised' and 'deserving'? Coloured unemployment on the margins of the 'poor White' problem

¹⁴ Wilcocks, *Report of the Commission of Inquiry*, 1937, 34.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 33.

To understand the context in which Coloured unemployment emerged as an ambiguous normative problem in these terms – as a question of ‘civilisation’ and therefore deservingness in an established racial hierarchy – it is necessary to set the Wilcocks Commission against a wider historical and political backdrop, namely the existing field of intervention concerned with White poverty. Much has been written about the rise of the ‘poor White’ problem, which emerged in the 1880s and shaped later state efforts to roll out welfare and public employment for the White population. This was driven by public discourse and the expert Carnegie Commission (1929-32), which framed the problem of White poverty as a matter of Whites losing their position as ‘civilised’ peoples, as a race group. But less appreciated is that the debates about White poverty refracted competing ideas about the status of Coloured populations vis-à-vis questions of ‘civilisation’, and of their entitlements compared to Whites.

The late 1890s marked a decisive shift in popular thinking around poverty in the colonies of South Africa, imported from Britain by the governing elite in the Cape (Bickford-Smith, 1989; Bundy, 1984; Giliomee, 2002; Seekings, 2007; van Heyningen, 1980). From around 1880, long-standing debates within Britain about the moral and social causes of poverty gained renewed prominence, as intellectuals, philanthropists, and reformers across the political spectrum increasingly articulated what has been described as a new ‘moral imaginary’ (Himmelfarb, 1970). While earlier views had emphasised individual moral deficiency and a lack of self-enterprising ethics, this emerging consensus placed greater weight on structural explanations of poverty and, in doing so, increasingly reframed poverty alleviation – previously the domain of philanthropists and the church – as a responsibility and obligation of the state.

In the Cape Colony, prior to the 1890s there had been no poor law and little legislation dealing with the indigent. The occasional public works programme had been focussed on rural areas. The wageless and starving sought assistance from private institutions, churches, the salvation army, the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA), the Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA), and a number of other charitable organisations for the elderly, orphans, and the sick. But in the late 1890s, the state was called upon by prominent philanthropists, through letters to the press and mass public meetings with political officials, to deal with chronic unemployment (van Heyningen, 1980). South Africa had undergone cycles of prosperity and recession, and just before the outbreak of the South African War (1899-1902), a period of depression had hit – due to the collapse of the share market, but also drought, rinderpest, and political uncertainty.¹⁶ Disbandment of military units after the war compounded joblessness in the Cape.¹⁷ Reverend J.J. McClure, a prominent Presbyterian minister in Cape Town, wrote an article for the YMCA's *Young Men's Journal*, pronouncing:

This is the city of the Unemployed. It is touching the conscience and the heart of our city. It would be an act of treachery to Christ to refuse to listen to the cry or to give no heed to the solutions of the problems of the Unemployed... It is not true economy from a financial and moral point of view to leave the care of the deserving poor in a community such as that of Cape Town, to the tender mercies of the individual citizens or individual Churches and other Christian organisations.¹⁸

Even as unemployment came to be recognised as a social and moral problem and a public responsibility, as elsewhere at the time, the ways it was interpreted and addressed were shaped by the specific intellectual and political conditions of the

¹⁶ Wilcocks, *Report of the Commission of Inquiry*, 1937, 46.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ *The Young Men's Journal*, 4, no. 7 (1899): 73-74, quoted in E. van Heyningen, "Refugees and Relief in Cape Town, 1899–1902," in *Studies in the History of Cape Town*, vol. 3, ed. C. Saunders and H. Phillips (Cape Town: Centre for African Studies, University of Cape Town, 1980), 70.

colony. In the Cape and elsewhere in the country, understandings of the problems of poverty and unemployment were heavily racialised, shaped by the new 'scientific' racism circulating from the metropolis, specifically the 'science' of social Darwinism and eugenics (Dubow, 1992; 1995; Goldin, 1987, p.22; Semmel, 1960). According to this new 'science', Africans were not only inferior but posed a health and existential threat to other races, and particularly to Whites. Colin Bundy (1984) explains that White poverty was suddenly a concern for the elite in the Cape because it was thought, if left to compete for economic survival with Africans, Whites would gradually degenerate as a race group. As a consequence, from around 1890, class-based solidarities were replaced with a new ethnic solidarity, based on the need to protect the imagined collective superiority, and purity, of the White race.

Coloured people occupied an ambiguous position in these emergent concerns with poverty and unemployment. As explained, Coloured people were seen as having an intermediate position in the racial hierarchy. But longstanding stereotypes about this group were normatively contradictory, pulling in different and often opposing directions. On the one hand, Coloured people were popularly seen among Whites as having a strong association with Western culture and values due to a close and even familial association with early settlers, and their cultural influence on the emergence of Afrikaans and Afrikanerdom. On the other hand, 'blood admixture' or 'miscegenation' (the mixing of different races) was seen to produce physical and moral degeneration in Coloured genes (Adhikari, 2009a; Coetzee, 1980). This ambiguity, built into the racial stereotypes of Coloured people, unsurprisingly shaped ideas about their status as labourers and their socioeconomic position. Whether Coloured people were natural workers, or else naturally 'indolent' as per established stereotypes about indigenous 'Hottentots' (Coetzee, 1988), was a contested question. This had important implications for how their poverty and unemployment were

understood: were Coloured people hard working, and therefore ‘civilised’ and ‘deserving’, or were they lazy and dependent?

When calling on the state to deal with unemployment in the Cape in 1899, Rev. McClure emphasised the distinction between deserving and underserving unemployed – those who genuinely wanted to work versus those who did not. He wrote:

If a man will not work, who can work, neither shall he eat. The time will come when the sense of the community will demand the imprisonment of every individual who won't work. Such a man is guilty of theft. He has no rightful claim to live by the efforts of others. This class seems to be on the increase in our midst and will prove a serious barrier to the moral and spiritual development of our land.¹⁹

In the years following, local labour bureaus were established to put the ‘deserving’ poor into work. While these were initially only for White workers, they were expanded to include Coloured people in 1906, on the grounds of their willingness to work (i.e. their ‘deservingness’). In September 1906, the Bureau reported that ‘any Coloured man, who – being physically fit – evinces a genuine desire to undertake this work, will be given every assistance by Government on application at the Bureau’.²⁰ After the establishment of the Union of South Africa in 1910, labour bureaus were set up for Coloured groups around the country at Kimberley, Port Elizabeth, and Cape Town (in the dock yard, in Belville, and in Wynberg) – but they were in smaller numbers and less well administered than for Whites, and were shut down in a matter of years.²¹

¹⁹ *The Young Men's Journal*, 4, no. 7 (1899): 73–74, quoted in E. van Heyningen, “Refugees and Relief,” 70.

²⁰ Wilcocks, *Report of the Commission of Inquiry*, 1937, 47.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 48.

The priority accorded to White poverty and unemployment persisted within a framework organised around ideas of ‘deservingness’ and ‘civilisation’. By 1920, White unemployment was officially cast in moral terms as ‘one of the worst and demoralising social evils’ and in social and political terms as a danger to the ‘civilised’.²² This was because, in the words of the 1921 national Commission of Inquiry into Unemployment, ‘a class that normally ought to be the most independent and secure in the State’ was experiencing ‘the hopelessness of a life with no prospect, no object, no independence which drags on a precarious existence from hand to mouth’.²³

Coloured populations, by contrast, continued to occupy an ambiguous and marginal position within this, now official, problematic of civilisation and deservingness. This became clear in the years following the 1921 commission, when the Pact government was elected in 1924 promising a ‘Civilised Labour’ policy. The Pact government, an alliance of the National Party and the smaller socialist Labour Party, promised to uplift poor Whites through a policy promoting preferential hiring practices, and by furthering racial segregation between Whites and Africans (including the abolition of African voting rights in the Cape, where they had long been enshrined).²⁴ As part of their election campaign, though, the members of the Cape National Party, and its leader J.B.M. Hertzog, travelled around the country announcing that the Civilised Labour policy would extend to Coloured people as well; they further disseminated that message in a new Nationalist mouthpiece newspaper

²² H.L. Lindsay, *Report of the Unemployment Commission* (Pretoria: Government Printer, 1922), National Library of South Africa (NLSA), 2.

²³ Lindsay, *Report of the Unemployment Commission*, 1922, 1-2.

²⁴ The Labour Party argued that the incumbent South African Party prioritised foreign capital over the protection of White standards of living. It criticised the admission of English immigrants and the tolerance of African urban migration, which it claimed threatened skilled White tradesmen in the labour market. The party warned that South Africa must not be allowed to ‘degenerate into a big, cheap-labour compound, in which people will find it harder to earn a civilised livelihood.’ *Cape Times*, 13 June 1924, quoted in J. Seekings, “Not a Single White Person Should Be Allowed to Go Under’: Swartgevaar and the Origins of South Africa’s Welfare State, 1924–1929,” *Journal of African History* 48, no. 3 (2007): 381.

for Coloured readers, *The Clarion* (Lewis, 1987, pp. 123-126). At a National Party conference in Bloemfontein in 1919, Hertzog articulated the party's stance on Coloured people explicitly: they should be given political and economic, but not social, equality with Whites. He justified this distinction by arguing, without further explanation, that Coloured people shared heredity, values, culture, and South African nationalism with White Afrikaners, but were, ultimately, a different (and implicitly inferior) 'race' (see also Seekings, 2007).

The Pact government, upon coming to power, launched its 'Civilised Labour' policy with a circular from the Prime Minister's office on 31 October 1924. The circular, issued to all heads of state departments and provincial administrations, decreed that they should substitute 'civilised' for 'uncivilised' labour wherever possible, and that this would be closely monitored by the state. It defined civilised as 'the labour rendered by persons, whose standard of living conforms to the standard generally recognized as tolerable from the usual European standpoint', and uncivilized labour as 'the labour rendered by persons whose aim is restricted to the bare requirements of the necessities of life as understood among barbarous and undeveloped peoples'.²⁵ State departments were asked to set an example for other public employers (municipalities, provincial administrations, divisional councils), which would be subsidised if they opted to pay the higher wages owed to 'civilised labour'; as well as private employers, who would be rewarded with preference for government contracts, and tariff protections against imports from abroad (Hancock, 1942, p.50; Yudelman, 1983, p.238).

This programme was bolstered by a package of other acts to promote the employment of 'civilised labour'. The 1925 Wage Act sought to regulate minimum 'civilised' wages in trades and industries not already governed by such legislation.

²⁵ Wilcocks, *Report of the Commission of Inquiry*, 1937, 36.

The 1926 Mines and Works (Amendment) Act of 1926, colloquially known as the colour bar, sought to exclude Africans from certificates of competency for skilled jobs on the mines and explicitly included Coloured and Malays with Whites. Such legislation was combined with strict influx controls on Africans into the Cape.

This Civilised Labour scheme ultimately failed to create many jobs for Coloured people – in part because of confusion over its key terms. Indeed, it was unclear to many at the frontlines of administration, and among private employers, whether the term ‘civilised’ applied to Coloured people at all. As the Wilcocks Commission later reported:

While there is no doubt in the European mind as to the inclusion of Europeans in the civilised labouring class, this is not so generally the case with regard to the Cape Coloured labourer. There can be no doubt that this is a reason for a lack of agreement met with as to whether the Cape Coloured labourer falls under the concept of civilised labour.²⁶

The Commission explained this in the following terms:

In actual fact the position of the Cape Coloured of the labouring type was and is somewhat ambiguous. Many generations of close contact with members of the European community, among whom they have lived, have brought about that the Cape Coloured of this class have in some measure acquired European ways of living and a degree of European civilisation which differentiates them from the mass of the Natives. On the other hand, the economic position and the standard of living of the great mass of the Coloured labouring type was, at the time of the inception of the “civilised labour policy”, and still is, definitely below that of the European working class in general, though on average somewhat higher than the Native; and it is with the latter, due also to a certain similarity of colour, that many Europeans... are more or less inclined to group the Cape Coloured labourer...It has been argued that if wage

²⁶ Wilcocks, *Report of the Commission of Inquiry*, 1937, 40.

rates are to be based on existing standards of living, then it becomes impossible for the Cape Coloured not yet on a “civilised” standard of living ever to attain it.²⁷

Critical commentators then and subsequently tend to treat the Civilised Labour scheme as a cynical effort on the part of the Pact government to earn Coloured votes, as the Coloured vote played a key role in their 1924 victory (Goldin, 1987; Lewis, 1987). Moreover, once in power, the Pact government failed to deliver on its promises of political and economic equality. The economic position of the Coloured population declined as a result of this policy. Coloured skilled and semi-skilled workers were further pushed out of their traditional roles in the labour market by unattainable educational qualifications (set by the 1922 Apprenticeship Act) (van Duin, 1989; Walker, 1959) and the share of government jobs held by Coloured persons fell from forty four per cent in 1924, to thirty per cent by 1932 (Goldin, 1987, p.42). In all, White labour was chosen over Coloured labour most of the time, and Coloured counterparts were paid less for the same work (Lewis, 1987, p.132).²⁸

Taken together, these debates and interventions demonstrate that Coloured unemployment was consistently assessed through a framework developed for White poverty, but never fully accommodated within it. The language of civilisation and deservingness justified limited support while reproducing uncertainty about Coloured labour’s status. This unresolved ambiguity would become a defining feature of later institutional attempts to manage Coloured unemployment.

²⁷ Wilcocks, *Report of the Commission of Inquiry*, 1937, 40.

²⁸ While those aiming to demonstrate the harms inflicted on Coloured workers tend depict the policy as having been tremendously successful in alleviating White poverty (Goldin, 1987; Lewis, 1987; see also Phillips, 2005), the literature on the period is actually rather more divided. Other perspectives have shown that White workers’ wages did not rise under the Pact government, and that it was mostly only beneficial to a small section of workers (Davies, 1979; Seekings, 2007, p.3).

Returning to the 1937 Commission: The emergence of a distinct focus on Coloured unemployment

It was in the aftermath of the Civilised Labour policy that the petition grew in the 1930s for a commission to examine the socioeconomic status of Coloured populations in their own right. Coloured political leaders and White liberals believed that Coloured populations had been betrayed, in that they had not been provided with the wages and socioeconomic standing of 'civilised men' (Lewis, 1987). Hence the Coloured-European Councils petitioned for change. They relayed recommendations to J. H. Hofmeyr, seen as the leading liberal in the South African Party-National Party cabinet. Hofmeyr suggested that a commission of inquiry would help the government identify the specific needs of the Coloured population, which, he said, had their own 'self-conscious national identity' (Lewis, 1987, p.159).

The Wilcocks Commission was appointed on the 13th of July 1934. It was constituted by a team of White experts from the Cape establishment. Professor J. du Plessis, a Dutch Reformed Church minister and theologian, chaired the Commission until he passed away in February 1935, when he was replaced by Professor R. W. Wilcocks, a sociologist and former member of the Carnegie Poor White Commission. The other members were from the Cape Education Department, and the Cape Divisional Council. In all, the Commission's experts were mostly conservative members of the Cape government. Only on the request of the African People's Organisation (APO), the most prominent Coloured political organisation, its leader, Dr. Abdullah Abdurahman, was appointed too (Lewis, 1987, p.158).

The Commission was not supposed to make recommendations, but ultimately did, calling on the state to treat Coloured unemployment as a more focussed problem in dire need of reform. The Report, completed in August 1937 and made public in February 1938, began by setting down a working definition of the 'Coloured'

population, which was at that stage defined differently in different parts of the country, and across different laws, even in the same territories (Posel, 2001).²⁹ The report explained that ‘the term “Cape Coloured” as ordinarily used is not one with a strictly defined meaning’.³⁰ It laid out various pieces of legislation that defined the term differently, before laying out its own definition:

A person living in the Union of South Africa, who does not belong to one of its aboriginal races, but in whom the presence of Coloured blood (especially due to its descent from non-Europeans brought to the Cape in the 17th and 18th centuries or from aboriginal Hottentot stock, and with or without an admixture of white or Bantu blood), can be established with at least reasonable certainty, (a) from a knowledge of the genealogy of the person during the last three or four generations; or/and (b) by ordinary direct recognition of characteristic physical features (such as colour of skin, nature of hair, and facial or bodily form), by an observer familiar with these characteristics.³¹

Overall, the report recommended that Coloured populations be treated as a separate racial group on these rather shaky grounds, and that further ‘miscegenation’ should be avoided. Regarding unemployment and labour conditions specifically, the Commission made the following recommendations, among others: for the government to issue instructions that ‘civilised’ also applied to Coloured labour so that Coloured workers would receive equal pay for equal work; for government departments to hire Coloured labour; for new posts to appoint Coloured people in

²⁹ Even after the Union in 1910, with the unification of the four previously separate British colonies, there remained a strong tendency for the decentralisation of power to local authorities, with legal definitions of race varying by region, and even within national legislation itself (such that even the same person could fall into different racial categories under different statutes) (Posel, 2001, Suzman, 1960). The Cape was the first to reflect a distinct definition: where before ‘Coloured’ had referred to all ‘Non-Europeans’, in 1904 the census reflected Coloured as a separate racial category in a three-way grid (‘White’, ‘Coloured’, ‘African’) (Goldin, 1987, p.13). Elsewhere, it was only after the controversy in 1911 surrounding the Native Labour Regulation Act (which defined the category of ‘Native’ to include Coloured people for the purposes of tax collection, which was successfully challenged in the courts) that the dominant trend emerged for legislators to recognise three races, instead of just two (Posel, 2001, p.90).

³⁰ Wilcocks, *Report of the Commission of Inquiry*, 1937, 9.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 10. Abdurahman rejected this definition, alongside two of the more liberal commissioners, Buchanan and Fowler.

the Department of Railways and Harbours; in the latter, that Coloured workers should serve their own people in posts such as ticket examiners, clerks, porters, policemen, etc.; to establish additional labour bureaus in centres with large Coloured populations; and to establish separate trade unions for Coloured groups.

But the Wilcocks Commission never gained coherent political support. While activists outside of government, and liberals inside it, continued to call for the implementation of certain recommendations for welfare reform made by the Wilcocks Commission (in education, housing, and employment, among others), little action was taken. In the early 1940s, liberals inside government suggested that a particular department should be responsible for Coloured social improvement, as was the case for Native Affairs. But this quickly gathered vehement opposition among Coloured political leaders and groups, who recognised that the Native Affairs Department had done little for African welfare and had only instead furthered segregation of Africans (for more on the Anti-Coloured Affairs Department movement, see Goldin, 1987; Lewis, 1987, pp.207-245; Van der Ross, 1986; Villa-Vicencio, 1995). Despite pushback from top government officials who recognised that Coloured groups, in general, did not want to be governed separately from Whites, in 1943 a Coloured Advisory Council was set up under the Department of Social Welfare. The Council itself struggled to gain support for its proposed reforms.

By the late 1940s, then, Coloured unemployment remained an acknowledged but weakly institutionalised problem: recognised by experts and activists, intermittently addressed, but lacking sustained political support or a dedicated administrative apparatus. The problem persisted alongside the National Party's ascent to power in 1948, in the context of which the governance of Coloured unemployment would be fundamentally reshaped.

A distinct middling position: The apartheid-era Department of Coloured Affairs & the Coloured Labour Preference Area

When the National Party came to power in the 1948 election, promising Apartheid or ‘separate development’, the administration of Coloured unemployment crystallised more clearly into its own field of intervention, with dedicated institutions, and more established intellectual and political support.³² While apartheid was itself a contingent project, developed through trial and error (Posel, 1991), from the outset key politicians and intellectuals imagined a distinctly modern project organised around racial categorisation and control. It was under the 1950 Population Registration Act that a nationally consistent legal definition of ‘Coloured’ was instituted for the first time: as ‘a person who is not a white person or a native’ (Government of South Africa, 1950, p.277).

Apartheid-era racial classifications drew heavily on those of the earlier segregationist state, and on ‘common sense’ understandings of racial difference prevailing at the time, which were informed by existing class and status hierarchies entrenched by the legacy of colonial and segregationist intervention (Posel, 2001). This pragmatic approach to race drew force also from an evolving ‘science’, coming from Afrikaner Nationalist scholars, and encouraged by the *Suid-Afrikaanse Bond vir Rassestudie* (South African Bureau of Racial Affairs (SABRA)), founded by the secret *Broederbond* (‘brotherhood’) organisation, both dedicated to the attainment of an Afrikaner republic (Dubow, 1992; 1995; Giliomee, 1995a).

Within this intellectual milieu, Afrikaner Nationalist thinkers – despite internal differences – tended to treat culture and socioeconomic position as natural expressions of underlying biological difference. This perspective was institutionalised

³² The National Party at this point was constituted by a more radical Afrikaner Nationalist faction, led by D.F. Malan, which broke away from the United Party under Hertzog and Smuts.

most clearly in the discipline of *volkekunde* (ethnology), which emerged in Afrikaans universities from the 1920s as a distinct approach to anthropology. Drawing on ethnos theory and a German Romantic tradition, *volkekunde* conceptualised human groups (*volke* or ‘peoples’) as organic, bounded entities, each possessing an inherited cultural character and a distinct, divinely ordained destiny. Social and economic inequalities were thus understood not as politically enforced, but as the outcome of natural, and God-intended, group differences – an assumption that would later underpin apartheid’s differentiated regimes of administration, labour, and ‘development’.

It was this more aggressive modernist approach to segregation, and the elite establishment advancing it, that firmed up the administration of ‘Coloured’ populations as a category separate from ‘Whites’. But even within the National Party itself, disagreements over the status of Coloured populations vis-à-vis Whites remained entrenched (Goldin, 1987; O’Meara, 1983). On the one side, those, largely in the Transvaal faction and in SABRA, known for being more right-wing and militant in their approach to Afrikaner nationalism, imagined Coloured populations as a totally separate group, to be administered in their own Homelands. On the other, some in the Cape National Party warned against alienating the Coloured group, and saw their future as entwined with White civilisation. Beyond the ruling party itself, there remained longstanding significant opposition to the idea of separate governance of Coloured people, on the grounds described above (see Hugo, 1978; Lewis, 1987).

Even so, in 1951 a Division for Coloured Affairs was established in the Department of the Interior. Izak David du Plessis was appointed as commissioner (and remained in that role until 1962). Du Plessis, having grown up in Cape Town, was an esteemed member of the Afrikaner Nationalist intellectual establishment: a

journalist for an Afrikaner Nationalist newspaper in the Cape (*Die Burger*), scholar, and poet (who had, notably, won the Hertzog Prize for poetry in 1937 (Jeppie, 1987, p.13)). Du Plessis received his doctorate on 'Malay' folksong from the English Department at the University of Cape Town, and published a number of articles on this theme.³³

As commissioner of the new Division of Coloured Affairs, he took a paternalistic approach to Coloured populations, hoping not only to understand them as a distinct group (with imagined inherent and exotic qualities), but to 'preserve' their 'pure' ethnicity, culture, and attendant socioeconomic status. A local Cape Town newspaper celebrated his appointment:

Like all the other great friends of the Non-Europeans, Dr du Plessis has now been given an opportunity by the Government to use his special interest in the Non-Europeans to assist the working-out of segregation for them.³⁴

On the opening page of the first report published in 1952, du Plessis hailed the development of a separate administrative apparatus to 'look after' the Coloured populations in the country, and made it clear that the sole test in making any recommendation to the Government would be 'what steps are necessary in the interests of the Coloured community, and of efficiency'.³⁵ The Annual Reports of the Division also emphasised its staff's commitment to being informed by available

³³ Du Plessis' article 'The Cape Malays', seen as a classic in the field, took an 'ethnographic' approach which began with constructing a model of the 'original Malay', from Indonesia, before racial mixing (Jeppie, 1987, p.25). His methodology involved a discussion of their physical and psychological factors, which counterposed their colour and complexion, facial structure, and hair texture to their 'passive', 'kind' and 'slow speaking' nature – which had been corrupted by racial mixing. Du Plessis believed that what was left of this distinct ethnic group needed to be protected and preserved.

³⁴ *The Torch*, 13 February 1951, quoted in S. Jeppie, *Historical Process and the Constitution of Subjects: I.D. du Plessis and the Reinvention of the "Malay"* (BA Hons thesis, University of Cape Town, 1987), 55.

³⁵ NLSA, U.G. 45/1952. *Report of the Commissioner for Coloured Affairs for the Year Ended 31st March, 1952*, I.D. du Plessis (Pretoria: Department of the Interior, 1952), 1.

knowledge and data, even by 1954 having compiled a bibliography of ‘all books, reports and other written material dealing with the Coloured Community’.³⁶

A priority, and distinct responsibility, for this Division from the outset was unemployment in the Coloured population. Du Plessis described the matter with urgency in his introduction to the first Annual Report. In his view, his role demanded ‘special attention to the question of employment’.³⁷ The report noted that while many Coloured people had been absorbed into industry during the war time boom (particularly textile and clothing industries; fruit, vegetables and fish canning; and engineering), many remained unemployed. National Department of Labour (DoL) statistics on Coloured unemployment from that year rendered the issue starkly in numerical terms. The Annual Report laid out the statistics on unemployment in the Coloured population in two separate tables, separated into columns ‘Males’, ‘Females’, ‘Juveniles’, and ‘Total’ from April 1951 to March 1952, and by place for March 1952.³⁸

	Males.	Females.	Juveniles.	Total.
April, 1951.....	4,321	1,714	455	6,490
May.....	4,372	1,669	363	6,404
June.....	3,821	1,937	310	6,068
July.....	3,705	1,635	278	5,618
August.....	3,484	1,611	319	5,414
September.....	4,059	1,561	302	5,922
October.....	3,865	1,579	312	5,756
November.....	3,756	2,397	333	6,486
December.....	3,766	2,776	402	6,944
January, 1952....	3,636	2,169	406	6,211
February.....	4,157	2,056	472	6,685
March.....	4,535	2,192	493	7,220

Figure 4: Total Unemployment Numbers, 1951, 52

³⁶ NLSA, U.G. 24/1954. *Report of the Commissioner for Coloured Affairs in Respect of the Year Ending 31st March 1954*, I.D. du Plessis (Pretoria: Department of the Interior, 1954), 11.

³⁷ NLSA, U.G. 45/1952, 1952, 6.

³⁸ Ibid. The report does not explain how unemployment was measured.

Areas.	Males.	Females.	Juveniles.	Total.
Cape Town.....	1,289	961	135	2,385
Port Elizabeth...	531	262	96	889
East London....	127	91	49	267
Durban.....	367	154	42	563
Bloemfontein....	27	22	20	69
Kimberley.....	138	37	3	178
Johannesburg....	667	544	49	1,260
Pretoria.....	52	32	Nil	84
George.....	31	12	Nil	43

Figure 5: Unemployment Numbers by Place, 1952

Upon his appointment, du Plessis had flown to Pretoria ‘immediately’ to meet with the DoL, then responsible for administering White, Coloured and Indian/Asian workers (but not Africans, who were managed by the Native Affairs Department), to negotiate a clear division of ‘responsibility for [Coloured] employment’.³⁹ It was then debated whether the Division should set up its own Labour Department. This was decided against on the grounds that both institutions wished to avoid ‘undesirable competition between Europeans and Coloureds’.⁴⁰ Instead, the Division and the DoL would work closely together to deal with Coloured unemployment. Du Plessis concluded:

The task of the Department of Labour and the Division of Coloured Affairs is, accordingly, to convince employers that Coloured labour can be efficient; to provide satisfactory labour; to take steps to train unsatisfactory labour so as to equip it for work and, above all, to ensure that the younger generation is protected against further deterioration. As the large numbers of exemplary Coloured workers prove, the Coloured community can continue to make a significant contribution towards... industrial development of the country.⁴¹

³⁹ NLSA, U.G. 45/1952, 1952, 6.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid.

Du Plessis's writing reflects sensitivity to the tension which had long defined understandings of Coloured unemployment: whether Coloured populations should be viewed as good or 'natural' workers, due to their historic occupation of skilled and semi-skilled trades, or whether they were instead pathological in the labour market, often viewed as lazy, weak, and unproductive, compared to the other races. Reflecting this tension, du Plessis reported both needing to 'convince employers' of the former, whilst also needing to resolve the latter through training and other interventions.⁴² The danger, as du Plessis presented it, was 'deterioration': deterioration of their socioeconomic status, and, reflecting the concerns initially laid out in the 1937 Wilcocks Commission report, deterioration of their middling position in the labour market.

Over the next two decades, the institutional apparatus to deal with Coloured unemployment dramatically expanded. In 1958 the Division, which had previously been housed in the Department of the Interior, was transformed into its own Department of Coloured Affairs, with P.W Botha (who would later become State President), appointed as the Minister.⁴³ The Department was populated by an array of clerks, officers, typists, and specialised researchers to collect statistics, which informed the determination of the 'needs' of the Coloured population, and the planning of interventions.⁴⁴ The staff ballooned from three in 1952, to 361 in 1959, of whom sixty three per cent were themselves Coloured, taking the position of lower order clerks and researchers.⁴⁵ Du Plessis had early on made the decision to desegregate the Division (later Department) to attest to his genuine commitment to

⁴² NLSA, U.G. 45/1952, 1952, 6.

⁴³ In July 1969, the Department was further expanded and renamed the Department of Coloured Relations and Rehoboth Affairs.

⁴⁴ NLSA, U.G. 32/1960. *Report of the Department of Coloured Affairs for the Period 1 April 1955 to 31 December 1958*, I.D. du Plessis (Pretoria: Government Printer, 1960).

⁴⁵ NLSA, R.P. 11/1963, 1963, 1.

the socioeconomic interests of Coloured people.⁴⁶ Shamiel Jeppie (1987) argues that this move was strategic: to gain popular legitimacy in the Coloured population against a backdrop of criticism about the governance of Coloured populations as a distinct racial group, separate from Whites.

This institutional growth owed to strong political support from inside the upper echelons of the National Party, driven primarily by W.W.M. Eiselen, then Secretary for Native Affairs and well-known Afrikaner intellectual, closely associated with SABRA. Ivan Evans (1997) describes how Eiselen was an idealist within the Department of Native Affairs, operating under the ministerial authority of Hendrik Verwoerd. For Eiselen, as a champion of ethnos theory and Professor of Anthropology at the University of Pretoria before taking on his political appointment, apartheid had a moral rationale grounded in Christian nationalist thought: the purported obligation of the state to foster the separate development of each 'ethnic group' towards its own God-given destiny.⁴⁷ In January 1955, Eiselen launched the Coloured Labour Preference Area, focussed specifically on preserving the imagined natural position of Coloured people in the labour market, in the geographical area which was understood as their original and rightful Homeland.

The Coloured Labour Preference Area was allegedly intended both to bolster the position of Coloured workers in the labour market and to restrict the movement and employment of Africans in the Western Province. These aims were articulated in a series of articles and memoranda by academics and senior policy advisors prior to the policy's launch (see Humphries, 1989). For example, Eiselen's own paper, 'The Native in the Western Cape', presented at a SABRA conference in 1955, drew on 1951

⁴⁶ NLSA, R.P. 11/1963, 1963, 5.

⁴⁷ For Verwoerd and others in the National Party, apartheid was a more pragmatic way to achieve racial segregation, and ethnos theory was 'little more than artifice' for a divide-and-rule project (Evans, 1997, p.276).

census data to argue that the African population in the Western Province would continue to grow dramatically unless prevented. He wrote:

We must bear in mind that many Coloureds look upon [Natives] as troublesome interlopers, who allow themselves to be used to keep wages down and, in addition, interfere in their domestic and family life in a demoralising manner (Eiselen, 1955, p.17).

In a contemporaneous speech, reported by a critical commentator, Eiselen further allegedly claimed that:

The Western Province [is] the natural home of the Coloured people and they have the right to be protected against the competition of Natives in the labour market (Snitcher, 1957, p.40).

Eiselen reportedly went on to argue that Coloured populations possessed a 'moral right' to demand such protection (Snitcher, 1957, p.40), and proceeded to define the geographical scope of the policy by drawing boundaries across the Cape Province, encompassing the area south of the Orange River and west of a line running from the magisterial district of Gordonia to that of Knysna.⁴⁸

The programme emerged gradually, taking a while to acquire administrative and legislative substance, in part because of initial criticism from industry. The Cape Chamber of Commerce and Industry vociferously challenged the idea that they could get by without cheaper African labour (see Goldin, 1984b, pp.21-25). Members of Parliament of all the opposition parties, farmers' and various other employers' associations, and others objected on the grounds that:

⁴⁸ A estimated 178 000 Africans lived in this region (Humphries, 1989, p.173).

It would be practically impossible to force the Coloured man down the economic scale from his position of skilled or semi-skilled worker to that of unskilled labourer (Snitcher, 1957, p.41).

Eiselen, as an architect of the policy, himself expressed doubt about whether the Cape economy could thrive without African labourers. He nevertheless reassured business that this would occur over a long period, arguing that the policy was necessary to avert the greater social and economic evils associated with racial mixing and the deterioration of the Coloured group (Snitcher, 1957).

It was only in the 1960s that the administrative means to safeguard Coloured employment, under the Coloured Labour Preference Area, was designed and enforced. In 1962 the Prime Minister announced that the Government would take practical steps to ensure 'the gradual replacement of Bantu labour in the Western Cape'.⁴⁹ Then on 23 November 1962 the Minister of Coloured Affairs, P. W. Botha, issued a statement to clarify this programme: that Bantu labour would gradually be sent back to the Homelands, where a programme of socioeconomic development was (supposedly) being enacted.⁵⁰ Accordingly, labour officers were empowered under the Bantu Labour Regulations Act to refuse to sanction the employment or continued employment of Bantu workers anywhere in the Western Cape. If a private employer wanted to employ an African, they would have to apply either to the nearest office of the DoL or the nearest magistrate's office, for a 'Coloured labour clearance certificate'. This certificate would only be administered if there was no suitable registered Coloured labour, and if the wages were at a suitable level to draw Coloured workers (see Goldin, 1984b).

⁴⁹ NLSA, R.P. 21/1967. *Department of Coloured Affairs Report for the Period 1st April, 1966, to 1st March, 1967*, D.J. Bosman (Pretoria: Department of Coloured Affairs, 1967).

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 4.

At this time, the zone of preference for Coloured labour was extended to 68 magisterial districts and several more committees were established, under the guidance of the Department of Coloured Affairs, to plan and oversee this process. Among others, an Interdepartmental Committee was established, represented by various departments: Coloured Affairs, Bantu Administration and Development, Planning, Labour, Agricultural Credit and Land Tenure, Forestry, S.A. Railways, Water Affairs, Commerce and Industries, Immigration, Community Development, and the Cape Provincial Administration. Its mandate was to carry out investigations and make surveys of Bantu labour in the Western Cape – reporting on their numbers, the type of work they performed, the places they were employed, as well as the nature and degree of the skill involved, and to make recommendations for their removal.⁵¹ It was at this point, in 1965, that a Directorate of Coloured Labour was established specifically to focus on Coloured employment, which set up facilities in thirty of the sixty magisterial districts of the region, where Coloured work seekers could apply for work.

The Coloured Labour Preference Area has been analysed differently by historians: like influx control, as a bid to direct cheap African labour elsewhere, particularly to the mines (Lacey, 1981); as a means to gain the support of Coloured people to fracture a potentially more united and threatening African nationalism (Goldin, 1984a; 1984b); or as an attempt to carve out a portion of the country where Africans would not outnumber Whites, as a 'last resort White Homeland' after the Defiance Campaign which had signalled the emergence of coordinated mass African resistance and heightened White political anxiety (Humphries, 1989, p.172). While these interpretations are not mutually exclusive, reflecting the diverse and sometimes competing concerns within the National Party, what matters here is less

⁵¹ NLSA, R.P. 21/1967, 1967, 5.

which motivation was primary than the fact that Coloured unemployment was being treated as a distinct problem requiring ever more elaborate administration.

But the policy was ultimately not very successful at creating employment for Coloured people. By 1976 the Theron Commission, a commission of inquiry into 'Matters Relating to the Coloured Population Group', reported, from census data, that the number of Bantu in the Western Cape rose by 43.5 per cent from 1960 to 1970, with 108 000 Bantu in the Cape Peninsula in 1970.⁵² Employers continued to hire African workers over Coloured workers, despite this being illegal. This was for numerous reasons. Significantly, there was widespread disagreement over the feasibility of the policy of restricting Bantu employment in an expanding economy already suffering labour shortages. Moreover, the administrative and institutional means to administer both influx control and employer preference were lacking. This meant many Bantu entered the region illegally, working informally on farms or in small-scale trading. It also meant the policy was administered haphazardly at the local level, with frontline officials giving out 'certificates of non-availability' very readily (more so in Port Elizabeth than in the Cape Peninsula), in part because they argued that the DoL's statistics on the available Coloured labour in the region were out of date.⁵³ The Theron Commission later explained that the DoL's data was patchy because of 'unwillingness' on the part of Coloured populations to register and to work.⁵⁴

But the lack of success was also due to administrative and legislative disagreements within the state. For example, there were disagreements in municipal and central government in the Western Cape over certain legal provisions regarding

⁵² E. Theron, *Report of the Commission of Inquiry into Matters Relating to the Coloured Population Group* (Pretoria: Government Printer, 1976), UCT Libraries, 305.8404 THER, 91.

⁵³ Theron, *Report of the Commission of Inquiry*, 1976, 92.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

Africans' entry into the Cape, such as over Section 10 of the Blacks (Urban Areas) Consolidation Act of 1945 as amended in 1952 (Humphrey p.173). While the Supreme Court argued that, according to this Act, Africans did not require permission from local administrators to enter the region for the first 72 hours, local administrators argued that this made it impossible to curb the influx of Africans.

SABRA, which had been influential in the formulation of the policy in the 1950s, became concerned with the actual implementation of the policy in the late 1960s, and SABRA members sought an interview with President Vorster to express these concerns in 1969. Vorster allegedly told them that their proposals for more stringent policy application were ivory tower ideas (Humphries, 1989, p.179). The Coloured Labour Preference Area was practically declared a failure on its own terms, and the policy was abolished in September 1984.

The failure and eventual abandonment of the Coloured Labour Preference Area marked the apparent limits of labour-market regulation as a solution to Coloured unemployment. Yet it did not displace the underlying problem-definition or diminish official concern. Instead, it opened space for new strategies to address unemployment, as attention shifted from regulating access to existing jobs towards creating employment through industrial expansion and spatial planning. It is to this next iteration – centred on industrial decentralisation, the more direct precursor to the Atlantis SEZ – that the chapter now turns.

Apartheid-era industrial decentralisation: Coloured populations on the margins of a concern with African unemployment

From the 1970s the field of intervention around Coloured unemployment expanded as officials in the Department of Coloured and Rehoboth Affairs (hereafter the Department) sought to attach their own concerns to a far more prominent national

programme: the industrial decentralisation scheme launched in the early 1960s. Although not conceived for Coloured populations, the programme offered the Department something earlier labour-market regulation had not – the prospect of creating jobs directly through state-led industrial relocation, supported by national finance and incentives.

Industrial decentralisation was a cornerstone of the apartheid project of separate development and was driven primarily by anxieties about rising African unemployment in ‘White’ towns. Unlike Coloured unemployment in the Cape, this was an issue of national political salience and priority. During and after the Second World War, rapid industrial expansion coincided with the decline of subsistence in the reserves (and later Bantustans), prompting large-scale African urban migration and the growth of African nationalism and trade union activism (Dubow and Jeeves, 2005). African urban unemployment was cast as a symptom of the breakdown of ‘tribal’ life, believed to generate moral decay and to undermine social and political stability in ‘White’ towns through crime, disorder, and protest (see for example Evans, 1997). Popular at the time was the call to ‘send them back’ (recounted by Suzman, 1948, p.7) – capturing the prevailing view that African people who had moved to the city, but had not yet found work and adapted into a modern proletariat, should be sent back to the reserves (Walshe, 1963).

It was in response to this problem that the apartheid state developed a programme of industrial decentralisation, initially focused on creating employment for Africans near, and later inside, the Bantustans. From 1960, incentives were introduced to encourage White-owned firms to relocate to designated ‘border areas’, adjacent to reserves but in White areas, with the aim of containing African urban migration (by providing jobs in Bantustans) while maintaining racial separation.

This interventionist approach to job creation emerged against an intellectual shift in Britain, North America, and elsewhere. Where earlier approaches to economic governance were more fragmented and limited in scope, including in South Africa, after World War II economic thinking increasingly treated large-scale state coordination and management as necessary to absorb unemployed populations, drawing on Keynesian demand management techniques. These approaches, for the first time, mapped the national economy as an abstract totality to be enumerated and managed (Dewar, Todes and Watson, 1986b; Mitchell, 1995). Regional planning, a key tenet of Keynesian demand management, promoted balanced population distribution and balanced regional growth. Equally influential in the post-war period was the growing concern with national economic development in recently decolonised countries, centred on the idea that states could induce industrialisation and economic growth by coordinating investment and socialising risk – a ‘big push’ that would bring into being the conditions necessary for sustained private investment (for example, Rosenstein-Rodan, 1957).

Similar ideas found purchase among South Africa’s planners as a rationale for the development of the Bantustans (Dewar, Todes and Watson, 1986b; Sparks, 2023). Over time, a policy that initially relied heavily on coercive measures – such as restricting the proclamation of industrial land elsewhere – shifted towards an inducement-based approach. To further attract private investment and stimulate employment creation, White industry was allowed to establish inside Bantustans from 1967, financial incentives were consistently improved, and wage controls were relaxed (until 1970 when all minimum wage legislation for Africans inside the Bantustans were terminated) (Pretorius, Addleson and Tomlinson, 1986). By the late 1960s and 1970s, this shift was formalised in national planning instruments. The Physical Planning Act of 1967 and the National Physical Development Plan of 1975

adopted the regional planning language of ‘growth poles’ and, for the first time (in 1975), designated ‘deconcentration points’ as growth centres located near metropolitan areas.

For officials concerned with Coloured unemployment, the decentralisation programme offered a new opportunity. In March 1965, after meetings between the Department and the Board for Decentralisation of Industry, it was agreed that the scheme should be extended from African to Coloured labour surplus areas.⁵⁵ This decision was officially announced in a 1971 White Paper on the Report by the Inter-Departmental Committee for the Decentralisation of Industries. Following this, industrial decentralisation focused on twenty growth points nationally, of which twelve were border areas, five were located inside Bantustans, and three were oriented towards Coloured labour – at Kimberley, Darling, and what came to be called Atlantis (Rogerson 1982, pp.55–56).

Other areas that were not designated as growth points were also to receive subsidies for the employment of Coloured labour, although not to the same extent, based on a calculation of the ‘relative pressure of labour’ in each area.⁵⁶ By 1975, the following non-growth points were also listed: Beaufort West, De Aar, Upington, Knysna, Mossel Bay, Oudtshoorn, George, Worcester, Burgersdorp, Middleburg, Great Brak River, Kokstad, and in 1975 Ceres, Cradock, Grahamstown, and Somerset East were added. It was decided that concessions for the employment of Coloured labour would also be granted outside the Western Cape, in the Northern Provinces, the Orange Free State (Bloemfontein, Heilbron, Odendaalsrus Virginia, and Welkom)

⁵⁵ Theron, *Report of the Commission of Inquiry*, 1976, 89.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 535.

and in the Transvaal (Potchefstroom, Middleburg, Standerton, Witbank, and Klerksdorp).⁵⁷

Atlantis thus entered the decentralisation programme as a late and initially marginal extension of a policy apparatus designed primarily to address African unemployment. As the next iteration in the longer string of interventions to address Coloured unemployment, Atlantis attracted considerable planning ambition and state resources, but, as the following section will show, it struggled to deliver employment at the scale anticipated.

Atlantis: An industrial zone to treat Coloured unemployment

In 1970 it was decided in parliament that there would be a growth point near Mamre, a small Moravian mission station town on the rural West Coast. The yet unnamed growth point would be approximately 45 kilometres north of Cape Town in what had been called the 'Cape West Coast Growth Zone'. This area was declared a Coloured Group Area in 1972 and was scheduled as a 'growth point' in 1973. In 1972, the Secretary of the Department wrote:

The Department is exceptionally pleased by the declaration of a group area for Coloureds adjacent to the rural Coloured area of Mamre and extending to the West Coast.⁵⁸

As soon as the new growth point in the Cape was scheduled, officials set about establishing institutional structures, and recruiting relevant planners and experts, to design and develop an industrial area. In 1973, the task of coordinating the project

⁵⁷ Theron, *Report of the Commission of Inquiry*, 1976, 535.

⁵⁸ NLSA, R.P. 44/1972. *Department of Coloured Relations and Rehoboth Affairs: Annual Report for the Period 1 April 1971 to 31 March 1972*, D.J. Bosman (Pretoria: Government Printer, 1972), 1.

was handed to the Divisional Council of the Cape, which agreed on the grounds that it did not have to put up any of its own funds (Heslop, 1978, p.98). The Divisional Council immediately set up the Mamre Development Committee, with representatives from central and local government (and in 1978 two Coloured residents and two industrialists were included). This Committee was renamed first as the Dassenberg Development Committee, and then in June 1975, as the Atlantis Development Committee. While the Division had initially thought about calling the new growth point 'Mamre', and changing the existing town to 'Old Mamre', this was apparently not 'acceptable' to the Coloured Affairs Department.⁵⁹ The Department had suggested the names Televista, Telenova, Silwerkruin, Sonneblom, Wesfleur, Dagbreek, Bonavista, Silvaria, and d'Almeida, before it settled on Atlantis.⁶⁰ 'It was not supposed to represent a city that was sunk, but a model city,' it was announced later at an opening ceremony.⁶¹

Piet Burger, Deputy Secretary of the Divisional Council of the Cape and a 'burly and amiable' man, was appointed Project Director for the Atlantis Development Committee.⁶² He said to local media:

I would like to devote my whole life to Atlantis...there is no bigger job satisfaction. But then my job will probably be filled by a Coloured man eventually.⁶³

This comment reflects the same ethos prevalent in the Department under du Plessis, which hired Coloured personnel apparently to demonstrate commitment to the advancement of the interests of Coloured populations themselves. It also reflected a

⁵⁹ "Any Suggestions for a New Town Without a Name," *Cape Argus*, 1974.

⁶⁰ "Name Sought for New Growth Point," *Cape Herald*, 1974.

⁶¹ "A new city among the sand dunes," *Cape Herald*, 1977.

⁶² "Atlantis Development," *Independent Newspapers Collection*, UCT Digital Collections, University of Cape Town Libraries, Cape Town, South Africa, <https://digitalcollections.lib.uct.ac.za/collection/islandora-16706> (accessed July 2023).

⁶³ *Ibid.*

shift in national government discourse, envisioning the Bantustans, and Coloured areas, as eventually self-governing. This paternalistic ethos implied a deficiency on the part of Coloured people to lead the administration of such a programme for themselves in the present; and it naturalised intervention by outside ‘experts’ (see also Li, 2007). In 1982, in an interview with *Die Burger*, Piet Burger made explicit the satisfaction he got from this paternalistic project: ‘the upliftment of the lower classes to a good middle class and higher gives us the greatest satisfaction’.⁶⁴



Figure 6: Piet Burger points to Atlantis (Independent Newspapers, No date)

In 1974, the Atlantis Development Committee appointed a consortium of (White) planners, engineers, transportation consultants, and land surveyors to prepare an overarching Guide Plan (du Plooy, 1976). The first plan for the area envisaged the city accommodating half a million people by 2010, and consisting of six interlinked towns, complete with all the needed amenities such as schools and magistrates’ courts, to be finished construction by the year 2000. Planning documents at the time set out different future projections for employment creation,

⁶⁴ *Die Burger*, 9 December 1982, quoted in M. Ebrahim, B. Roberts, A. Ruiters, and R. Solomons, *Atlantis: A Utopian Nightmare?* (Cape Town: South African Labour and Development Research Unit, 1986), 12.

based on different assumptions and techniques. D.W. du Plooy (1976, p.2), a town planner representing the Divisional Council of the Cape on the Development Committee, wrote in a published paper in a local planning journal:

Based on different assumptions and techniques, these projections were made of industrial workers to be employed at Atlantis. Each projection represents a different rate of industrial establishment. Accordingly [sic] to these projections, the number of industrial workers in the year 2000 could be 24 700, 41 100 and 105 000 ranging from a low, to average to high figures respectively. The average projection for the year 2010 shows a total of 44 900 workers.

In 1974 the planners assured that the zone was being ‘designed according to the most modern town planning practices’.⁶⁵ Even though they could not take prospective industrialists to the site, as roads had yet to be developed, they were confident that ‘there [was] a lot of interest’ and they had ‘great hopes’.⁶⁶ To attract industrialists, the Board for Decentralisation of Industry signed off an array of exemptions, levies, and financial incentives – some of the most generous to any growth point in the country. A local newspaper celebrated the ‘bold stroke of industrial planning ... [that has] cleared the way for development which could mean jobs for hundreds in the Western Cape’.⁶⁷ The substantial incentives were treated as ‘evidence’ in liberal English newspapers in the Cape, of ‘how important the Government views the need for industrial development in the Western Cape’, and that ‘the Government realises that the provision of better opportunities for Coloured people in the Western Cape is a national priority’.⁶⁸ By 1986, the state was offering employment incentives of up to eighty per cent of the total wage bill (limited to a

⁶⁵ “Nobody There, but It’s to Be Home for 340,000,” *The Argus*, 1974.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ “Mamre: This Could Mean Jobs for Hundreds,” *The Argus*, 1974.

⁶⁸ “State ‘Bait’ to Attract Industry to West Cape,” *The Argus*, 1974; “Enlightenment at Mamre,” *Cape Herald*, 1974.

maximum of R70 per worker per month), among many other incentives. These included a forty per cent rail rebate, a 125 per cent tax-deductible training grant, forty per cent rent and interest subsidies for ten years, relocation allowances of up to R500 000 with an additional twenty per cent for ‘unquantifiable costs’, and a forty per cent housing subsidy for key personnel (Ebrahim et al., 1986, p.3).

An official investor brochure showcased Atlantis as the ‘industrial city of the future’.⁶⁹ Each page featured four columns – in Afrikaans, English, German, and French, in blue and green font – promising ‘extremely attractive incentives to approved industrialists’.⁷⁰ They described ‘a modern industrial layout’, ‘attractive sites for both large and small enterprises’, and a local supply of labour, walking distance from factories, to be bought at wages below the national average.⁷¹



Figure 7: Atlantis Marketing Brochure

⁶⁹ NLSA, AF.1982-70. *Atlantis Marketing Brochure*. Divisional Council of the Cape, 1980, 3.

⁷⁰ NLSA, AF.1982-70, 1980, 3.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 4.

At the official opening ceremony of Atlantis in 1977, then Minister of Economic Affairs Chris Heunis stated baldly that the town had been developed ‘to draw surplus (coloured) labour away from the (white) City of Cape Town’, according to *Rand Daily Mail* (Ebrahim et al. 1986, p.6). But throughout the following decade, employment creation at Atlantis was slow. While a major state corporation, Atlantis Diesel Engines, was celebrated as an exciting ‘anchor tenant’, and Atlantis saw significant investments particularly in the textiles and clothing industry, there was not always a high rate of employment in these factories, and, once established, they went through rounds of mass retrenchments during recession years (Ebrahim et al., 1986; Newton, 1988).

Divisional Council Annual Reports came to complain that the slow pace of development at Atlantis was the result of a ‘lack of funds’, and the Atlantis Development Committee reportedly began worrying about funding cuts as early as 1976.⁷² Academics deliberated whether there was enough industrial activity in main centres to warrant decentralisation; and whether Atlantis would attract the right kind of ‘propulsive industries’ to sustain growth and address unemployment or whether it was instead destined to attract ‘lame ducks’ like branch plants (Dewar and Watson, 1980; Ebrahim et al., 1986; Newton, 1988). The Cape Chamber of Industries worried that the incentives would draw factories away from Cape Town, causing a problem for Coloured workers in the Coloured residential area of Mitchell’s Plain, and asked for incentives to be granted there as well: ‘There will be 230 000 Coloured workers there and work must be found for them’.⁷³

The population of Atlantis grew from zero in 1973 to 30 000 Coloured people in the 1980s, but the pace of arrivals, those who chose to move for the promise of

⁷² “Officials to see Atlantis,” *Cape Times*, 1976; Divisional Council of the Cape, *Divco Document 1981/82*, cited in in Ebrahim et al., *Atlantis: A Utopian Nightmare?*, 12.

⁷³ “New Deal for Cape Industrialists,” *The Argus*, 1974.

housing and jobs that they could not access elsewhere, outpaced the delivery of what they came for. While some new residents reported feeling happy and content in Atlantis, others complained bitterly about the high costs of living, unemployment, and not being able to pay their rents (see Ebrahim et al., 1986). As early as 1977 newspaper *The Herald* reported that residents were ‘fuming’ over the lack of telephones and sense of isolation from Cape Town, exacerbated by delays in building a post office and erratic public transport.⁷⁴ In the absence of the thriving economy predicted in plans, local residents complained that they were being made to ‘foot the bill for apartheid’, and a local association was formed in 1981 demanding that residents receive the same rebates to live there that industrialists were receiving.⁷⁵ To make up for the slow pace of employment creation, the local state began to offer welfare support and concessions: rent subsidies in 1980, electricity subsidies in 1983 and, in December 1985, the Minister of Health Services and Welfare announced a R5 million emergency aid fund for the unemployed in the Western Cape (Ebrahim et al., 1986, p.19). An office was set up in Atlantis, with three hired social workers, to handle the applications for temporary aid here.⁷⁶

Meanwhile, from the 1980s, African migrants, largely from the Eastern Cape, began to move to Atlantis. They came either in search of work in factories, to join friends and relatives, or because they had lost jobs on nearby farms (Cape Town Museum, 2021; Magida, 2013, p.18). Banned from residing in the Coloured area of Atlantis, or on factory premises, these migrants began to erect makeshift houses for themselves in what later became known as Witsand, the informal settlement on Atlantis’ periphery. Those who could no longer afford to cover rent in Atlantis also moved to Witsand.

⁷⁴ “Fuming: That’s what they’re doing,” *Cape Herald*, 1977.

⁷⁵ *The Argus*, 29 May 1981, quoted in Ebrahim et al., *Atlantis: A Utopian Nightmare?*, 11.

⁷⁶ *The Argus*, 21 December 1985, quoted in Ebrahim et al., *Atlantis: A Utopian Nightmare?*, 19.

Only one of the six planned towns in Atlantis was ever completed, and investment remained slow and uncertain. The economic crisis of the late 1980s put pressure on the apartheid state, and in 1989 it was announced that Atlantis' incentives would be terminated. This led to the closure of twenty one factories and a loss of 2000 jobs in a two-year period (Nel and Meston, 1996, p.92). By 1993, one third of all industrial jobs had been lost (Nel and Meston, 1996, p.92).

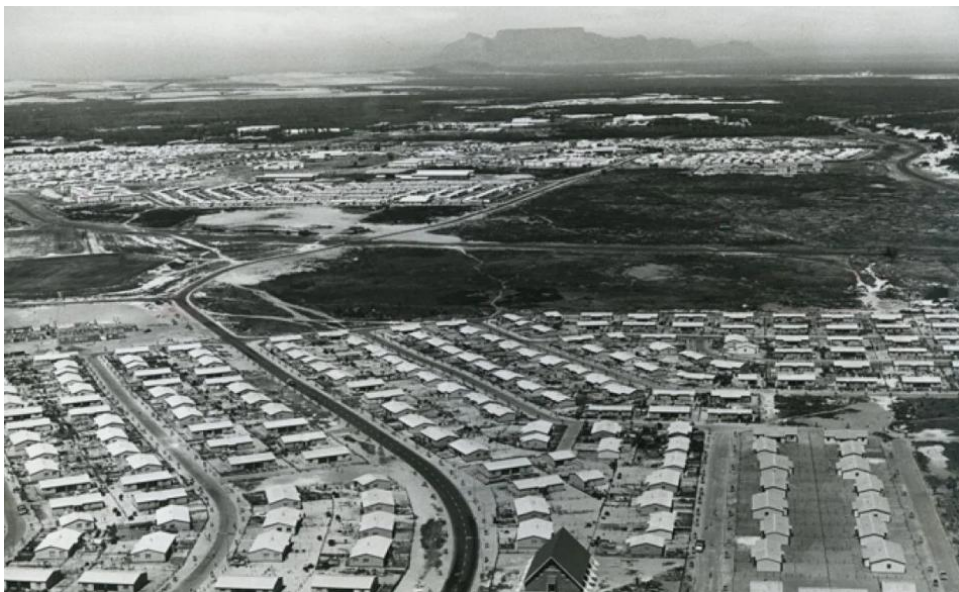


Figure 8: Early photograph of Atlantis residential area (Cape Town Museum, 2021)

Conclusion

The post-apartheid Atlantis SEZ, and the state corporation established to govern it, are the latest in this longer history of interventions to address Coloured unemployment. The first brainstorming for the post-apartheid Atlantis SEZ emerged around two decades after the apartheid industrial decentralisation scheme incentives were terminated in 1989, in vastly different political circumstances and drawing on different expertise. Prior to this, in the early 1990s, trade liberalisation of textiles and clothing, along with the Rand's strength at that time, led to increased competition

from cheap Chinese imports, and further factory closures in Atlantis.⁷⁷ Later, the 2008 Global Financial Crisis catalysed further job losses. In the eighteen months leading up to the 2011 Mayoral Committee report that initiated post-apartheid political action around unemployment in Atlantis, over 850 jobs were lost due to the closure of ten factories (City of Cape Town, 2011, p.9).

This chapter has traced the contingent and contested emergence of a distinct field of intervention concerned with Coloured unemployment across the twentieth century, beginning with a specialised commission of inquiry in the 1930s. It has shown how this field took shape on the margins of more politically salient interventions into White poverty and African urban unemployment, and how its problem definitions shifted over time. Early expert diagnoses of Coloured unemployment were grounded in questions of civilisation, deservingness, and entitlement: whether Coloured people were sufficiently ‘civilised’ to warrant state support comparable to that extended to poor Whites. Under apartheid, however, the dominant rationales for intervention were reworked. As the chapter demonstrated, solutions to Coloured unemployment increasingly stemmed from policy frameworks originally devised to address African urban unemployment and poverty – most notably industrial decentralisation – where the central concern was less the fulfilment of social entitlements than the containment of crime, unrest, and perceived social disorder in White towns.

Across these successive phases, the field of intervention around Coloured unemployment generated a series of concrete schemes aimed at securing employment, including labour bureaux and public works initiatives in the early twentieth century, the Civilised Labour policy of the 1920s, the Coloured Labour

⁷⁷ “Has Atlantis lost its heart?,” *Cape Argus*, 2005.

Preference Area instituted under apartheid, and later the extension of the national industrial decentralisation programme to Coloured labour through the establishment of Atlantis as a purpose-built industrial zone. While these schemes differed in form, scale, and rationale, they repeatedly failed to generate employment at the scale anticipated. Their shortcomings were shaped by persistent ambiguity over the status of Coloured labour, disagreements over policy premises, and the field's marginal position within broader state priorities. Nevertheless, the field itself endured and expanded, sustained by shifting forms of expertise, administrative machinery, and political justification.

It is this layered history of intervention and failure that informs contemporary actors' scepticism that the zone may represent yet another iteration of promised employment creation, and limited delivery. It is to this context that the thesis now turns. Chapter 2 examines the establishment of the Atlantis SEZ Company and explores why it has taken the particular institutional form it has, amidst struggles over the contemporary meaning of developmental 'success', and concomitant doubts about potential state 'failure'.

Chapter 2

Assembling an ethical corporation for market inclusion



Figure 9: Atlantis SEZ model (photograph taken by this author)

I turn off the West Coast Road, past the line of palm trees and the sign welcoming passersby to Atlantis. I pass the smattering of operating factories in the wider industrial area, and the dusty, undeveloped patch of land allocated for the Atlantis SEZ.⁷⁸ A few minutes later, I arrive at the zone company's offices. The offices occupy part of the Atlantis Foundries, an industrial complex first established in the 1970s by Atlantis Diesel Engines and purchased by Daimler/Mercedes-Benz in 1999. I wait for security to open the gate, watching the SEZ flags snap in the wind. A silver company vehicle sits in the parking lot, logo gleaming in the sun. Inside, the walls are decorated with images of wind turbines, light bulbs, and bright green leaves. The

⁷⁸ At the time, there were about forty operational factories in the wider Atlantis industrial area (City of Cape Town, 2025). The 94 hectares allocated for the zone itself fall within this wider area.

centrepiece is a large 3D model of the SEZ. An interactive tablet allows visitors to light up sections of the model, revealing an ideal vision of what the zone might look like in future.

My colleagues are already scattered among rows of white desks, chatting or working before the 9 a.m. meeting. Today is a special day: Johan, the CEO, brings news that the company has finally formally concluded the 'land for shares' agreement with the City of Cape Town. In exchange for shares in the company, the City has transferred ownership of the 94 hectares earmarked for the SEZ to the company. This transaction was essential for classifying the zone company as a Provincial Government Business Enterprise (or Schedule 3D entity) under the Public Finance Management Act of 1999. The land, officially valued at R56 million, became an asset on the company's balance sheet, proving to National Treasury that the company met the legal requirements to be scheduled as a government business: that it was 'commercially viable' rather than dependent solely on provincial government transfers.

When I joined the company, its officials proudly recounted the work required to reach this milestone. Being scheduled as a government business was crucial to opening its own bank account, generating revenue, and engaging in the corporate activity necessary to attract investors and, ultimately, to create jobs and other market participation opportunities. In the meeting, my colleagues cheer. Johan, the CEO, addresses the room:

We are no longer a company with just desks and chairs. We are now a company with a R60 million [rounded up] asset on our balance sheet. Now we need to make the land sweat. There are no more excuses. The game is changing. The work starts now. Right from the start I said we can't just get investment without including the local

population... We are a green tech SEZ which means we must be sustainable in every way. We will do what is right. We will show we really care.

After this speech a colleague turns to me with tears in his eyes and says, 'I feel like I should clap.' Such speeches represent the state company as both a commercial success (with R60 million on its balance sheet) and as willing and able to engender 'inclusion' in Atlantis. They depict the company as a particular kind of arm of the developmental state: as a corporation with developmental ambitions befitting of contemporary 'ethical capitalism' (Barry, 2004; Dolan and Rajak, 2016a).

The green tech SEZ, and the state corporation established to run it, are the latest iteration of state-led efforts to deal with unemployment in this area (see Chapter 1). Initially developed as an industrial zone by the apartheid state in the 1970s, the original zone failed on its own terms to create much employment. Half a century on, and after over ten years in the making, the green zone itself has yet to attract major investment, or to create many formal economic opportunities. Against this backdrop, this chapter examines how the zone company continues to be represented as a plausible 'success' by its officials. More specifically, it explores how and why, in such a context, officials continue to vest the company with an imagined life as commercially successful, socially responsible, and willing and able to address unemployment in Atlantis.

Scholars across anthropology, sociology, and political economy argue that since the 1970s states have been transformed through a series of linked processes. At one level, some have argued that the state has been partially 'rolled back' as public institutions relinquish direct responsibility for planned improvement (or 'development'), outsourcing once-core functions to private firms, NGOs, and quasi-public entities. But matters are more complicated. Many argue that the state has simultaneously been 'rolled out' in new forms that are infused with the logics of

business: cost-cutting, competition, efficiency, and revenue generation (Peck & Tickell 2002). Under the tenets of New Public Management, state institutions are restructured to resemble businesses, and required to produce audited outputs, demonstrate financial sustainability, and justify their existence through business-style metrics (Bear, 2015; Bear and Mathur, 2015; Craig and Porter, 2006; Power, 1999). Social problems such as unemployment are reframed as solvable through market-making, investor attraction, and the cultivation of enterprising subjects who should take responsibility for themselves (Breman et al., 2019; Nguyen, Rydstrom and Mao, 2024).

While these perspectives help explain SEZs as market-based solutions to unemployment, they fail to capture the mandate expressed by company officials. Officials insist that the zone company should not just be commercially viable, but that this will, in the same stroke, underpin the company's developmental success, as a socially responsible agent of inclusion in Atlantis. To make sense of these intertwined commitments – to both 'commercial viability' and proactive 'social responsibility' – I turn from more conventional perspectives on the encroachment of business logics into the state, to a set of perspectives on the changing role and character of business itself within the realm of what was once state-led developmentalism.

Since the turn of the millennium, with the onset of what has been dubbed 'ethical', 'humane', or 'compassionate capitalism' (Barry, 2004; Benioff and Southwick, 2009; Hopkins, 2006), businesses have increasingly come to take on development challenges once the domain of the state, in the name of being 'responsible' and indeed, 'ethical'. This *ethicalisation* of business began with the adoption of voluntary codes and frameworks, and Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) programmes aimed at ameliorating the social and environmental harms of

normal business operations (Dolan and Rajak, 2016a). More recently, however, such strategies have expanded into schemes promoting ‘sustainable development’ and ‘inclusive growth’ in the round (Blowfield and Dolan, 2014).

Indeed, this has led some scholars to dub new forms of corporate-led development as a new ‘orthodoxy’ wherein corporations are projected not just as good citizens but as active leaders in promoting and setting the terms of development, in the place of absent, inefficient, or else ‘failed’ states (Dolan and Rajak, 2018; Elyachar, 2012; Rajak, 2011). Through claims to be both ‘ethical’ and ‘responsible’ for the poor, and for ‘development’, corporations assert, and even naturalise, themselves as architects of a new kind of modernising paradigm, espousing social improvement through corporate initiative (Rajak, 2006).

In South Africa, it is far from the case that the state has ceded its imagined responsibilities for development to global corporations. Yet, popular and political discourse often paints the state as lacking the capacity and efficiency of the private sector, and corporations do play a role in development. Dinah Rajak (2011; 2014), for instance, shows how a private mining company in South Africa accumulates authority as a developmental leader on a domestic political stage through deploying health, education, and enterprise development programmes. Rajak (2011, p.19) notes that the power of such schemes lies, to a great extent, ‘in [their] capacity to claim global applicability (under-written by supposedly universal market values) and at the same time to frame those values in line with particular paradigms of national development’.

While the ideals, languages, and frameworks of ethical business assert businesses’ developmental intentions and capabilities – in taking on functions that had once been the domain of the state – the Atlantis SEZ company reveals how a reverse phenomenon is occurring. In this setting, it is a particular arm of the

developmental state which draws on the repertoires of ethical business, to assert its credentials as a developmental entity – as not only commercially viable and efficient, but also ‘socially responsible’. This chapter therefore argues that the influence of business practices within the state goes beyond cost-cutting, efficiency, and transparency. Crucially, it extends to the very conceptualisation of state responsibility for the poor, as efficiency and corporate incentive are posited as the means to achieve development in an explicitly ‘ethical’ fashion.

In Atlantis, the repertoires of contemporary ethical business offer officials a novel language and set of ideals through which to articulate renewed public institutional will and capacity for solving the intractable problem of unemployment that has long occupied state institutions. While the previous chapter showed that earlier regimes cast their interventions as ‘moral’ – according, for example, to Christian nationalist ideals – and as ‘expert’ according to shifting norms, what this chapter shows is that the imagined morality and capacity of public institutional intervention take a new form. The company’s officials adopt the explicit claims to ‘ethics’ – framed in terms of ‘social responsibility’, ‘sustainability’, and corporate efficiency – so characteristic of contemporary business.

To make this argument, the chapter begins with an elaboration of representations of the company as an ethical corporation. It then explores how these come about. First it situates the establishment of the company within the political pressures that demanded rapid demonstrations of commercial viability from SEZs. These included scepticism from National Treasury and the threat of licence withdrawal by the Department of Trade, Industry and Competition (DTIC), the department responsible for the SEZ policy. Next, it examines how these pressures catalysed a set of struggles among key stakeholders responsible for administering the SEZ – struggles over what kind of institution could feasibly deliver on the zone’s

developmental mandate in a commercially viable way. These struggles, themselves shaped by a wider context of scepticism towards state developmental capacity, and of fiscal conservatism, resulted in the company's institutional form and foundational transactions, particularly the land-for-shares agreement that transformed municipal land into a balance-sheet asset. Finally, the chapter turns to the ideas, self-understandings and practices through which officials work to sustain the project's plausibility as an ethical, developmentally capable business: audits, ethical codes, global sustainability frameworks, and the embodiment of contemporary corporate responsibility in leadership figures.

The ideals, vocabulary, and frameworks of ethical business gain purchase among company officials for different reasons, both institutional and personal. They offer officials a set of criteria by which the project's market inclusion efforts can be judged as moving towards success, rather than as evidence of failure, as proper procedure and 'ethical' intent substitute for critical evaluations of current project outcomes. Moreover, proactive engagement with ethical business repertoires enables officials to present themselves as competent and even moral professionals, and aids in their pursuit of career progression, status, job security, as well as, for those hailing from Atlantis, improved family prospects and personal social reputations.

Before turning to Atlantis in greater detail, the chapter sets out existing anthropological perspectives on corporate ethicising and social responsibility. These perspectives offer a valuable lens through which to understand contemporary developmental state institutions. In particular, they provide a starting point for examining hybrid public-private institutions such as the zone company, which performs corporate-style responsibility to claim renewed developmental capacity.

Borrowing developmentalism from business

For much of the post-colonial era, even as business was widely engaged in economic activity, it assumed little responsibility for initiating planned socioeconomic improvement. By the 1980s, following widespread criticism for business's harmful social and environmental consequences, businesses around the world began to adhere to voluntary codes of practice, and to adopt forms of CSR to ameliorate the impacts of their operations (Dolan and Rajak, 2016a). These voluntary frameworks and schemes have been described as a means to prevent legally-binding regulations on corporate practice, instead shifting corporate responsibility into the domain of public opinion (Shever, 2010). Early critics described CSR as merely a 'band aid' (Jones, 1996) or 'a smokescreen' (Sharp, 2006) to legitimise the continuation of a capitalist order. But, by the turn of the millennium, the role of business was extended further, from 'defensive' forms of corporate responsibility to 'offensive' opportunities to tackle development challenges (Kramer and Kania, 2006).

Influential business and management perspectives, from the likes of Paul Collier (2008) and C.K. Prahalad (2005) who popularised the phrase 'bottom billion' and the 'bottom of the pyramid', cast poverty as a site of opportunity for business and cast business as new champions of development. In this paradigm it is imagined that the efficiency and entrepreneurialism of private business can be harnessed to create new market opportunities, such that the poor can become active participants in productive market activity and thereby alleviate their own poverty. As opposed to previous paradigms of aid and welfare, poverty is recast as a problem amenable to market intervention, and social provisioning a matter of enabling the poor's inclusion in markets – often led by corporations (Blowfield and Dolan, 2014).

CSR is rebranded and subsumed within the wider mission and values of 'sustainable development' of which businesses project themselves as active agents (Blowfield and Dolan, 2014). Businesses adopt all manner of frameworks, campaigns, and programmes to demonstrate their developmental credentials, ranging from HIV-treatment to upskilling and enterprise development. These programmes are no longer ad hoc and peripheral to core business operations, but central to business models, as well as corporate identities (Elyachar, 2012). Moreover, demonstrating the expanded reach of ethical business, where conventional CSR was limited to programmes to support employed workers, major corporations now tout Corporate Social Investment (CSI) budgets and schemes that extend beyond their workforces, to include wider populations and developmental ambitions (Rajak, 2006; 2008; 2011).

Here, the self-interest of business, and efficiency and entrepreneurialism, are framed not as antithetical to, but symbiotic with, social wellbeing and improvement. Businesses are increasingly cast also as 'responsible' and 'caring', indeed as 'moral' (Roy, 2010). As Dolan and Rajak (2016a, p.1) write in their introduction to an anthropology of CSR:

It is now the global brand- whether Coca-Cola, Nike, WalMart, or L'Oréal - that serves as a guarantor of social welfare and environmental stewardship, uniting financial profit with social good in the localities in which companies operate across the globe, and giving rise to a contemporary expression of what has become known as "enlightened self-interest".

Some argue business has taken over a role once held by the state. Indeed, corporate-led development claims to 'transcend the parochial politics of national government or the failure of state-led development, promising instead the universal rationality and efficiency of business' (Rajak, 2011, p.7).

Less attention has been paid to how corporate virtue is constructed within corporations themselves – the everyday practices and relations by which corporations come to appear as moral actors with culture, conscience, and responsibility, alongside corporate efficiency. Shever (2010) explores how Shell Oil Company’s public relations staff work to remake the company into a good corporate citizen, and a ‘caring’ and ‘benevolent’ neighbour to communities surrounding its refineries in Argentina. She describes how official reports project smiling faces of staff and community ‘partners’ to the public, while a young female community representative projects the benevolent ‘face’ of the company on the ground. This company official becomes the corporeal manifestation of Shell’s good intentions and friendly disposition, through establishing personal and affective relations with the community. Rajak (2011), already mentioned above, describes how CSI officials for a mining company see themselves as doing moral work and vest the company with an imagined conscience in the way they speak about it. This is played out in their own experience of the company, but also on a public stage, through both every day and spectacular displays of corporate care, through various development programmes and events.

Perspectives that explore the construction of corporate virtue tend to do so to make critical arguments about how corporations avoid more substantive responsibility for the poor, or how they accumulate political legitimacy in the form of moral capital (for example Rajak, 2011; Shever, 2010). But this is not because corporations possess inherent purpose or unified intention (like profit or power). Indeed, Welker (2014) argues that corporations’ unity and coherence cannot be taken for granted. Like states, corporations are constituted through disaggregated everyday practices, relations, and representations (Abrams, 1988; Aretxaga, 2003; Das and Poole, 2004; Hansen and Stepputat, 2001; Mitchell, 1999; Sharma and

Gupta, 2006). From this perspective, corporate ‘personhood’ is neither automatic nor abstract; it is something made, managed, and performed by different people and institutions in the context of their unique pressures and opportunities. An implication is that forms of institutional self-presentation can spread more widely and be adopted by diverse kinds of entities (and people), including the zone company (and its officials) focused on in this thesis. The question becomes: how, in practice, might the discourses and frameworks, and forms of self-presentation, of ethical business find their way into, and shape the daily practices of, a public institution, in its own institutional, political, and financial context?

In what follows I explore how the repertoires of ethical business (corporate savvy, rational efficiency, and social responsibility) came to be taken up by the Atlantis SEZ Company, and how they are deployed in practice to construct an image of developmental capacity here. While much has been written about the encroachment of market- and business-based logics into the state, as highlighted in the chapter’s introduction, states rarely feature in debates about corporate personhood and CSR (Knudsen et al., 2020). A parallel move has therefore yet to be properly observed: that the repertoires of ethical business too have become a new standard which state institutions may be expected to observe. Not only do corporations now seek legitimacy through performing developmental credentials; public institutions in turn seek to legitimise their developmental credentials through borrowing the language and ‘best practices’ of corporate developmentalism.

Before exploring the wider political conditions in which the zone company was established, and in which officials came to adopt such corporate repertoires, the chapter begins with the zone company itself. What follows shows how corporate ethical frameworks are mobilised within this quasi-public institution to imagine and enact a particular vision of developmental capability.

The Atlantis SEZ Company as an ‘ethical business’

In the first email exchange I ever had with Johan he insisted that the Atlantis SEZ was in the process of becoming ‘**very ready for market uptake**’ (in bold font, as came many of his emails). When I joined the company a few weeks later, all the talk among officials was that ‘finally’ they could start acting like a business and fulfil their mandate of investment attraction and job creation in earnest. Officials regaled me with stories of their progress at having become a ‘real corporate outfit’. One of the earliest zone company employees said to me in our first conversation:

I remember when the ASEZ [the Atlantis SEZ] had nothing – there was no company, there was no logo, there were no offices. I remember trawling round town with Johan, like two lost souls looking for somewhere to locate.

She described finding the Atlantis office space, which ‘still had purple carpets straight out of 1975’, and expressed being proud of ‘what [they had] achieved since then’. She, and others, described the zone company as a contemporary business outfit successfully exercising a ‘sustainable’ and ‘ethical’ developmental mandate.

Amongst company officials, claims to business savvy worked alongside claims to ethical purpose. During an online code of conduct meeting run by Human Resources the officials were asked to talk through the ‘values’ of the company in their own words. With enthusiasm, the staff raised their virtual hands on Microsoft Teams and volunteered descriptions like: ‘fostering an enabling environment for business – we should look to cut red tape in the way we do things’. This was followed by:

Passion for the common purpose – ultimately the reason we do what we do as a company is to make sure the community is integrated into the SEZ. We want investors coming in but most importantly we want community involvement.

This synthesis of commercial and ethical ideas reflects contemporary discourses about businesses as the appropriate vehicle for achieving developmental outcomes (Blowfield & Dolan 2014).

The notion that the company's 'purpose' was to integrate 'the community' into the SEZ stems from contemporary best practice frameworks of ethical business and, more specifically, frameworks about how SEZs can be more 'sustainable'. Company officials studied reports from mining companies on how to secure a 'social licence to operate' and on CSR and 'shared value'. They also made constant reference, in everyday talk and formal presentations and reports, to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the Eco-Industrial Park (EIP) framework. The EIP framework was devised by UNIDO, the World Bank, and *Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit* (GIZ) in the 2010s to define the basic performance criteria needed for industrial parks like SEZs to transform into and qualify as EIPs, defined as more 'sustainable' and 'inclusive' than SEZs of old. The framework requires industrial zones to commit to various 'performance' indicators, that straddle both 'economic' metrics (including revenue generation and profit, job creation, and competitiveness), and 'social' metrics (including 'addressing the needs of the community and employees, including in relation to labour rights and working conditions, gender, community dialogue, land acquisition and social infrastructure' (World Bank, 2021, p.15)).

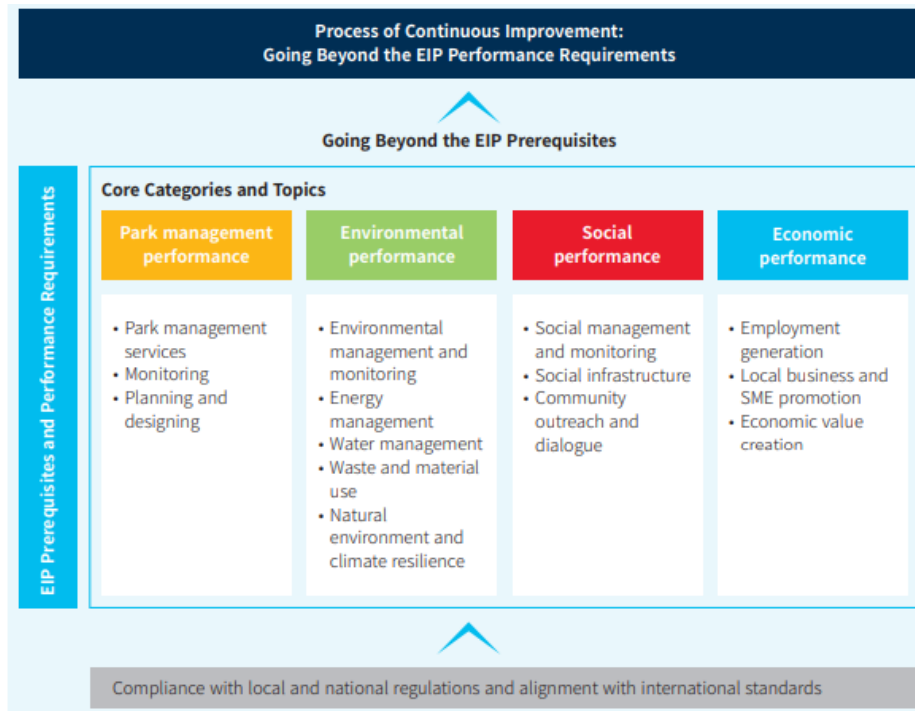


Figure 10: UNIDO Eco-Industrial Park Framework (World Bank, 2021, p.27)

Through such frameworks, employment in the zone is framed not merely as less exploitative but as offering agency and ‘empowerment’ to surrounding communities. Indeed, employment creation is rearticulated more broadly as ‘market inclusion’ – achieved through schemes like community participation, skills development, and enterprise development. Company officials insisted that their market inclusion efforts were not a paternalistic kind of ‘charity’ or even CSR (itself seen as outdated), but an opportunity for ‘shared value’ between future businesses and the community. An official explained:

CSR is a bit outdated in terms of ‘shared value’ principles and tangible socioeconomic transformation. People think soup kitchens and maybe a Christmas party. Nice-to-haves. When we say it, we mean economic empowerment and transformation. That the community will benefit economically. It’s about market inclusion: jobs and actual opportunities that are sustainable in the long run.

This story of corporate success and ethics is captured neatly on the website. The home page lays out the slogan ('The pioneer place where Africa's green economy thrives'), and describes 'inclusive growth' as part of the company's 'mission' (Atlantis SEZ Company, 2025b). Photographs feature the zone company team alongside 'beneficiaries' in various skills and enterprise graduations and ceremonies, all featuring flashy bright green branding, and big smiles. An upbeat video with a peppy soundtrack concludes by describing the zone as 'an exciting prospect for investors, the environment, and the community of Atlantis', and the 'FAQ' explains:

The Atlantis Special Economic Zone (ASEZ) ensures community benefits through its focus on inclusive growth, skills development, and enterprise empowerment. By integrating the community into its development plans, ASEZ creates job opportunities, supports small businesses, and promotes socio-economic progress (Atlantis SEZ Company, 2025a).

The use of the present tense conveys the sense that company goals of attracting investment, catalysing new and inclusive value chains, and securing the inclusion of Atlantis's population are already being achieved. As noted, this discourse stands in stark contrast to the everyday reality where, at the time of my fieldwork, the SEZ itself remained unbuilt. Yet this disjuncture is precisely what makes such representations significant. In the absence of large-scale investment and opportunity creation, success is articulated through other registers: corporate form, ethical compliance, and alignment with global frameworks.

Such representations are part of the creation of a compelling narrative about the company's plausibility, published not only online, but in company reports to its board members, and repeated in myriad presentations with government officials from the city, province, and national government. In each of these meetings, the officials always had the same speech prepared, starting with the rhetorical question,

‘What have we achieved thus far?’ Alongside the R56 million land for shares transaction, a clean audit, and other indicators of ‘progress’, they would list the numbers of people supported through skills and enterprise development, and community consultation. During a visit from Provincial Treasury, the company’s biggest funder and majority shareholder, an official concluded this presentation by saying:

The ASEZ is not just planning and engineering. Through our work in the community we can honestly say we are sustainable.

To further understand why zone company officials sustain this picture of corporate developmental success, despite the zone not having achieved its overarching goals, this discourse needs to be situated in a wider context, of the struggles to establish the zone company in the first place. The next two sections demonstrate why performing commercial viability became a prerequisite for the establishment of the SEZ and the company, and of its continued survival. In a context of scepticism towards state-led developmentalism in general, and of fiscal austerity, the zone company’s developmental credentials hinge on its claims to be business-like. It is to this context that I now turn.

Industrial policy ‘by stealth’: The emergence of the 2014 SEZ Act

The zone company was established in late 2019, amidst intense pressure from the DTIC, the department responsible for the SEZ programme. Although the Western Cape provincial government’s Department for Economic Development and Tourism (DEDAT) had received the SEZ licence in June 2018, by mid-2019 there was still no visible progress in operationalising the zone. GreenCape, the non-profit contracted

as the Project Management Unit in 2013, had advanced aspects of planning, but the absence of a dedicated operating entity troubled national officials. In the words of a DEDAT official:

The guys from the DTIC came down and basically said, “Listen guys, you got your licence in 2018, it’s now 2019. There is no evidence of any movement in terms of getting something going here. If you don’t show a bit more evidence of actually putting together an entity, to drive this SEZ, we are going to withdraw the licence.”

The DTIC’s ultimatum must be understood in the wider political economy of industrial policy after apartheid. From the 1990s through the early 2000s, the DTIC had to ‘fight’, in the words of one of its senior protagonists, for both funding and political acceptance for industrial policy.⁷⁹ According to Lionel October – the department’s former Chief Director of Industrial Policy – this fight was against an entrenched anti-industrialisation consensus shaped by National Treasury, conservative economists, voices from business, and the influence of the World Bank and IMF. October put it starkly:

Government had a very anti-industrialisation agenda in the 1990s because the World Bank came out against industrialisation. They said we’re a post-industrial society and needed to focus on finance – capital flows, liberalisation, and such. People thought our best route to prosperity is deregulation, privatisation.

In this context, October described the initial Industrial Development Zone (IDZ) framework, formalised in 1997, as a ‘victory’. Contributing to this sense of achievement, the IDZ framework was formalised during the same period as the adoption of the GEAR macroeconomic policy (in 1996), which was renowned for its conservatism (see also Bond, 2000; Marais, 1998; Padayachee and Fine, 2019).

⁷⁹ At the time the DTIC was called the Department of Trade and Industry, renamed in 2020, following a merger with the Economic Development Department. I have chosen to refer to the department consistently as the DTIC to avoid confusion.

The idea of industrial zones occupied an uneasy position. SEZs are often analysed as archetypical ‘neoliberal’ tools in promoting global competitiveness and FDI attraction (Hart, 2002; Jauch, 2002; Ong, 2006). But in South Africa the meaning attributed to zones was more complicated. Because industrial decentralisation had been central to apartheid regional policy, anything resembling a state-planned and subsidised industrial area was politically suspect in the early democratic period. October recalled that critics of industrial policy dismissed zones as ‘sunset industries’, ‘handouts’, and ‘crony capitalism’, and used these critiques to justify the withdrawal of support for major sectors like textiles. The collapse of places like Atlantis in the 1990s was, in his account, the direct consequence of this retreat. As he put it, the DTIC ‘lost the battle’ in those sectors over support for industry.

At the same time though, even among those more supportive of industrial policy, like the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU), there was cynicism about industrial zones. Known for its uncompromising stance on labour rights and entitlements, COSATU argued from the outset that IDZs were just typical EPZs in disguise, and would result in undesirable labour exploitation (Chinguno, 2009; 2011).

Yet for October and his colleagues, industrial zones represented something else: a pragmatic tool for re-industrialisation, job creation, and regional development. October had studied at the University of London where he ‘was exposed to industrial policy’. He said, ‘Industrialization is key to full employment and to raising living standards.’

In October’s telling, the IDZ policy framework of 1997 was ‘industrial policy by stealth’. It had emerged in an ad hoc way, in response to the Coega Industrial Zone, which had been developed independently by the Coega Development Corporation in the Eastern Cape in the 1990s, as the first post-apartheid zone. The DTIC had then

leveraged the successes of Coega to motivate for further state assistance and funding for a more comprehensive framework for industrial zones. He said:

We used to get funding year by year to get the infrastructure going, so that's how the old concept existed. We didn't have an industrial policy framework then – we had industrial policy by stealth.

Following Coega, a number of zones were set up around the country in 2002, at East London, Richards Bay, and OR Tambo International Airport.

By the mid-2000s, however, persistent criticisms of the IDZ model forced a policy rethink. Critics argued that these zones, meant to make the country more globally competitive at attracting FDI, were not, in practice, 'special' or competitive enough, and were not managed efficiently (Chinguno, 2009; 2011; Phiri and Manchishi, 2020; Qumba, 2023; Tang, 2008; The Centre for Development and Enterprise, 2012). Unlike successful zones elsewhere, South Africa's zones have the same labour laws as those governing the rest of the country (as a result of certain compromises with COSATU on the question of labour exploitation), which critics argued alienated potential investors. Indeed, these early industrial zones were not attracting significant investment or creating many jobs, and relied heavily on public finances rather than private revenues.⁸⁰ Recognising these weaknesses – and the increasing competitiveness of global investment markets – the DTIC began revising its IDZ framework in 2007 (DTIC, 2012).

This revision process culminated in the 2014 SEZ Act. The Act sought to improve the commercial offering of South African zones by introducing clearer governance, more coherent coordination mechanisms, and a set of incentives designed to make zones more financially viable and internationally credible. The

⁸⁰ Moreover, jobs that were created were said to have relocated from elsewhere (Chinguno, 2009; Jauch, 2002).

latter included a preferential fifteen per cent corporate tax rate, a building allowance, employment tax incentives, and customs-controlled area relief.

In October's telling, it was really the political support from provincial Ministers of Economic Affairs, and from the Minister of Finance at the time, Pravin Gordhan, which helped motivate for the new SEZ Act. He explained that in the 2010s, these Ministers had rallied around the idea that zones could be an advantageous source of provincial growth. Meanwhile Gordhan, with a background in the trade union movement, served as 'a reliable support for the idea of industrial policy'. This was at a time, October explained, after the 2008 Global Financial Crisis had 'hit South Africa hard', when a massive state stimulus to the economy was broadly politically accepted. Gordhan had signed off an allocation of R1 billion for investment in infrastructure for industrial zones. This funding, coupled with support from the provinces, helped rally momentum around a revised SEZ Act, published in 2014, with an annual budget for the first time.

Against this backdrop, despite the support offered by ambitious provincial ministers, the need to demonstrate the success – and commercial viability – of the country's zones became central. As October put it, the DTIC needed 'success stories' to win the broader debate about re-industrialisation. It was in this climate that the DTIC intensified its oversight of SEZs, and why by 2019 it threatened to withdraw the Atlantis SEZ licence unless visible progress was made. The Western Cape government's rapid creation of a state-owned zone company later that year – and the innovative financial manoeuvres to trade land for shares that followed – must be understood as part of this longer history. It was a strategy to secure political support for developmental interventionism by packaging it in the language, metrics, and institutional forms of commercial success.

Struggles over the ideal corporate form to deliver development in Atlantis

The establishment of a state-owned corporation to run the zone entailed further struggles over the very meaning of commercial viability. While everyone involved agreed on the need for ‘development’ and the creation of jobs and other market opportunities, there were sharp disagreements among key stakeholders over what institutional form could plausibly deliver this. Competing actors advanced different visions of the ‘proper corporate form’; each presenting their preferred model as the condition for securing developmental credibility and commercial success.

Officials at GreenCape, the local non-profit that had been assigned the role of Project Management Unit for the zone in 2013, were adamant that the only proper way to administer a zone was through a ‘private operator’ (a private business). According to GreenCape officials’ reading of the 2014 SEZ Act, SEZs in South Africa are required to appoint a private operator to operationalise them. An official at GreenCape described this entity as needing to be ‘small, fast, and market oriented’ with a ‘viable business model’ and saw these as the condition for SEZ success. GreenCape officials had even established an entity that they felt should perform this role. Alex, who had been appointed to run it, said:

The ultimate challenge for the SEZ is that it needs an entrepreneur, a *real businessperson*, who can think efficiently and make it work.

Alex told me that ‘after several conversations’ with the existing head of the project in June 2016, he decided to leave his job in ‘boutique project finance in Africa’ with a major private insurance firm, to join GreenCape in establishing a private operator. He saw this as ‘an opportunity to set up a business that could fulfil what needed to be fulfilled, in a way that worked’. He explained that his conviction in

his own approach was justified because of his MBA and his twenty-year career in the renewable energy sector, with experience in ‘the whole value chain of renewable energy’ from ‘working overseas in manufacturing to project development and asset management’. He sat on the boards for independent power producer companies and had ‘a lot of Environmental and Social Governance (ESG) experience’. He surmised:

I had a constructive track record to being able to set up a private operator. To do that effectively and in a way that would actually deliver on commercial and therefore also developmental goals.

He emphasised that he had the particular skills and orientation to mediate the challenge faced by the SEZ as he perceived it: to attract investment and create market opportunities, in a way that was financially sustainable. Since 2014, GreenCape had begun running various community participation and skills development programmes in Atlantis. Alex insisted:

The thing with an SEZ, something that is supposed to achieve socioeconomic development objectives *and* work like a business, is that it requires thinking integratively. You’ve got to look at how are you going to make it work operationally, financially, the business model and have a social licence to operate. Put those together to come up with something that works holistically, that’s what I came in to do, that’s the approach GreenCape had.

Despite Alex’s staunch view that only a private business would be able to achieve the dual goals of commercial viability and development, this vision did not come to pass. Ultimately, Esther, one of DEDAT’s Director Generals, with the support of others in the province, made the decision to establish a state corporation (specifically a ‘government business enterprise’ according to the Public Finance Management Act) to operationalise the zone instead. While not the private operator Alex had in mind, a government business offered other benefits to realise

developmental aspirations. Officials from DEDAT explained to me that behind Esther's drive for this institutional form was a desire to secure more access to funding for the province itself. As already mentioned, unlike other government entities, according to the Public Finance Management Act, a government business enterprise (termed a Schedule 3D entity) can borrow money on financial markets, earn revenue, and make a profit. This legal remit means that a government business enterprise is a much more powerful vehicle for development than the provincial government. The mandate of provincial governments is restricted to social service and basic infrastructure delivery, and their access to funding each year is precarious, allocated by the national government according to the highly contested Provincial Share Agreement (Lodge, 2005). A DEDAT official said:

Esther wanted a 3D listing. She just had a bee in her bonnet that she wanted a 3D, really commercial entity that could borrow and lend and could really be a powerful development vehicle or even a cash cow for the province.

After DTIC's visit to DEDAT in 2019 to tell them to operationalise the SEZ with immediate effect, the decision to establish and register the zone company occurred within two weeks. GreenCape's project team was dissolved (although some of its staff were eventually recruited into the company). A corporate advisor ran a workshop to conceptualise how the company should be structured. Johan, who had been the head of a special provincial unit focussed on infrastructure development, was appointed as the CEO of the new Atlantis SEZ Company 'practically overnight'.

Johan described the decision to set up a government business enterprise, as opposed to a private operator, as 'the game of government doing something to attract the private sector'. He said to me once, 'So my battle is always to try to get people to think commercially.' But, in his view, in comparison to Alex's, it was not that the

private sector needed to *do* development in place of a weak or failing government, but that the state could adopt a commercially-sound approach. In his view, to achieve the developmental success the company had to ‘dance between the two [between government and the private sector]’. He explained:

You can’t get a banker in here. A standard banker. Because he wouldn’t understand government. And you can’t get a typical civil servant in here because he wouldn’t understand the private sector. So, this is the game of starting with state money, but thinking like a business, to unlock inclusion, and all these nice goals we have for ourselves.

For Johan, commercial viability was not opposed to state developmentalism but constituted its condition: without thinking commercially, the zone company could not plausibly claim to deliver on its developmental mandate.

But even after the company was established, it became subject to further contestation. Critics cast the state corporation, in opposition to a private operator, as old-fashioned, slow, inefficient, lacking agility, and therefore also as unable to earn its own revenue. GreenCape officials, for example, complained that the state company, unlike a fully private operator, would be weighed down by the typical inefficiencies of a government department. Alex said:

GreenCape had to hand over responsibility and the agility we created was lost. The SEZ is bloated. You could be so much more efficient about it. You don’t need like thirty people running an operation where you don’t have actually any investors, you know. That’s just an approach to doing things that’s, well, way outdated.

He explained that the large team amassed at the zone company, with a team of officials for every aspect of operationalisation ranging from business development to skills and enterprise development, seriously impinged on financial viability. He complained:

Financial viability when you have a team of thirty, is thirty, forty, fifty million. Now you've got a completely different prospect of what it is to be financially viable as an entity.

He went on, sighing:

Frankly, right now, I have little hope that the SEZ can prove that their business model is actually working. By virtue of the structure that is in place, the fact is, nobody who is actually entrepreneurial will even want to work there! Bit of a catch-22.

More significant, though, officials at the National Treasury, responsible for finalising the listing of the zone company, were similarly sceptical. Until late 2021, the Treasury insisted that the SEZ company did not meet the criteria, according to the Public Finance Management Act, to be a Schedule 3D entity (a government business enterprise), because it would 'never be commercially viable'. The requirement for a 3D listing is that the entity must be financed fully or substantially from sources *other* than the provincial revenue fund, or national transfers. Goolam Manack, the head of the Public Entities Governance Unit of the Budget Office in National Treasury, explained to me that according to their 'analysis of the business case', they had doubts about whether the zone would meet these requirements. He said:

The kind of institutions we have managing SEZs is important. We have to make sure they are well managed, sustainable, and are able to do what we intend them to do. A 3D is a very different animal. It's a business entity so it must be able to offer a service and charge for that service and make enough money to operate independently.

He explained that with an SEZ in every province (and some provinces with two SEZs), they all competed for investment, impinging on their chances of being

financially sustainable. The issue, as he put it, was both one of classifying SEZs correctly, and of avoiding ‘pouring resources into an entity that would ultimately not achieve its goals’ and divert funding from where it was needed most. He exclaimed:

How much [sic] resources would you put into an SEZ?! If people are talking about job creation for example, it may take a long time and huge amount of investment to realise that through the SEZ. You are diverting resources! The social need is actually now but you are diverting resources in favour of a different programme.

Finally, Goolam worried that the zone company would become a ‘drag on the fiscus’, leading to increased national debt, which would negatively influence national prospects of being able to borrow money cheaply through financial markets. He explained:

When lenders make a decision to lend money to South Africa – to buy South Africa’s debt at a certain price – then they will say there is a risk here.

Ultimately the conflict resolved when officials from the newly forming zone company, and from the Cape Town and Western Cape governments, came up with the idea of a land for shares agreement. While different officials remembered differently ‘whose idea it actually was’, they all agreed it was the ‘turning point’. A zone company official involved in the process put it to me thus:

The City said, “Look, we can’t just give you the land! The MFMA [Municipal Finance Management Act] and all these other statutes mean that we can’t simply hand over the land. We’d get an audit finding! It would be a problem! So we were in this debate and we [the company] said, “Well, we can’t buy the land because we don’t have money”, and we had you know, said “Maybe we can get the money from Province” but Province was clear they don’t have money, they can’t give us money to buy the land. So, it was kind of going around in circles a bit. But then we said, “Ok well maybe we can get a lease that is a long-term lease at a very basic rate.” So that’s where this word ‘peppercorn rate’ came from. You pay in peppercorns – nothing – for the land. But

City even said “Look, you know, it’s going to be difficult.” Then we had a big meeting with the City and I went into the meeting thinking we were gonna talk about how to make this lease thing work. And then in the context of the meeting with all these people sitting around, [another of the zone company’s executives] said, “Well, why don’t you sell us the land?” I thought: “Oh boy, where’s the door?” Then we started talking about a possible share transfer. [A City official] said “Ok” and the lawyer said it could work. The rest is history.

The company official explained this was a significant manoeuvre because up until this point, the City had made it clear that ‘they did not want to be burdened by the SEZ’. But when the idea came up of the City becoming a minority shareholder in the SEZ, alongside Province, without having to fund it directly, there was a change in sentiment. The City sold the zone company 94 hectares of land in exchange for R56 million-worth of shares in the company, against a calculation of its future value. The company then made the case, which Goolam and his team eventually accepted, that this R56 million was an investment, not a national government transfer. Talking about how difficult this process had been in a team meeting, one of the zone company executives joked facetiously: ‘There are a lot of dead government officials.’

It was in this fraught political environment, shaped by scepticism towards SEZs – of their ‘bloated’ and ‘old-fashioned’ management style, and their ability to perform well financially – and a politics of fiscal prudence in a global financialised context, that the zone company was established in 2019, and officially listed in late 2021. The particular institutional form that it took – as a state corporation, or, officially, ‘government business enterprise’ – cannot be read as the simple adoption of business-style management within the state, to the exclusion of a developmental mandate. Rather, the establishment of the zone company was the result of a struggle over how such corporate-style management might serve as a condition for developmentalism in the first place. In what follows, I develop this argument,

showing how the language and frameworks of ethical business – that blend corporate efficiency with social mandate – structure the everyday practices and self-understandings of zone company officials themselves.

The ethical state corporation in practice

While the land-for-shares agreement was a celebratory moment in the company, and evidence that the company was truly becoming ‘commercially viable’, it also intensified expressions of anxiety among company officials as they reckoned with the potential that the zone might not succeed at being commercially viable, nor in its developmental ambitions. The delays in being listed, the absence of clear investment prospects, and the drying up of expected funding streams sharpened these doubts. It was these precarious circumstances that made it necessary for officials not only to proactively demonstrate ‘success’ outwardly (particularly to government), but also to defend and foreground their own claims to be performing properly, according to the ideals and frameworks of a contemporary ethical corporation.

In the final sections of this chapter, I show that the language and frameworks of ethical business infuse the everyday life of the zone company in interrelated ways that help to shore up the company’s *plausibility* as a success. Firstly, commitments to corporate-style efficiency and productivity offer officials a defence against diagnoses of potential zone failure because these help distinguish the company, and officials themselves, from negative stereotypes associated with the state. But beyond corporate discipline, I show that the performance of corporate *ethics* furnishes officials with a further set of practical and discursive tools through which to imagine company success; and to pursue their own personal and career-related projects.

Corporate discipline: Not another failing state entity

Johan explicitly framed the company as being in an in-between period during which officials had to ‘prove’ themselves. He characterised prospective investors as ‘low calibre’, echoing the head of business development who described them dismissively as ‘three guys with a laptop and a good idea’. While GreenCape had celebrated its own success at attracting over R700 million in investment (five green tech manufacturers which established on land outside the SEZ perimeters, but were given permission from DTIC to benefit from pending zone incentives (GreenCape, 2019a)), this investment attraction had significantly slowed. A Spanish wind tower manufacturer that began operating in 2015 had scaled down its operations and put all its staff on ‘half time’, due to changing policy conditions in the renewable energy sector, which negatively affected its business case.

This heightened concerns that funding and political support would evaporate. DEDAT had declared that they would only fund operational costs for seven years. Zone company officials were also worried that the DTIC’s SEZ Fund was drying up. Furthermore, the National Treasury had made it clear that they were unwilling to grant tax incentives to any new zones, on the grounds that these would, in their view, deprive the fiscus of potential revenues. In this context, Johan repeatedly emphasised the need for the company to demonstrate its credentials as a ‘real, professional, corporate outfit’. In a team meeting he said:

There is lots of pressure on us. The Western Cape government has employed a clever team of people to assess if we have reason to exist. We have to prove these politicians and sceptical Provincial and National Treasury people dreadfully and horribly wrong. We had the nice plan to get operational costs [for running the company] from the Western Cape government, and top structures [industrial infrastructure for tenants] from the SEZ fund, but it’s all fallen through. And as for the tax incentives: the DTIC

is blaming the National Treasury and the National Treasury says, “Bugger off.” We’re on our own. The nice story of funding is gone. And the Western Cape government is now saying, “You’re sucking money out of us, forget about it.” We will have to approach private sector developers. We have to be financially self-sufficient. We have to be faster, more proactive. We have to show that we are the one professional outfit in a sea of mediocrity!

He paused, looking around the room, before continuing, ‘If we don’t start acting like a business, we’re just another sad story, and there are many of those.’

This comment about becoming ‘another sad story’ reveals how the language of corporate professionalism – injunctions to be ‘financially self-sufficient’, ‘faster’ and ‘more proactive’ – function to ward off diagnoses of impending institutional failure. Officials conjured stark images of failure: becoming another bloated state entity, draining public resources, and reinforcing stereotypes of incompetence. An explicit alignment with imagined private sector discipline and ethics provided officials with a set of justifications to distance themselves from other state-owned enterprises (as per Johan’s earlier comment about being ‘the one professional outfit in a sea of mediocrity’). As one company official put it in a team meeting about the code of conduct:

Just because I work for government, I need to show that I work my patch and have the integrity and hard work ethics of someone from the private sector.

At a company strategy workshop at a hotel, officials took home all the extra food in napkins, someone saying:

Think of all those times you’ve heard of government officials having huge banquets and you’re like, “*Tut, tut, tut.*” That can’t be us guys!

Associating themselves with imagined private-sector ethics helped officials assert competence and moral integrity.

This impetus for the company to be seen as a corporation, as opposed to another ineffective state institution, was institutionalised through an intense commitment to following proper, formalised procedure. Officials spoke frequently about the importance of a ‘clean audit’ and during my fieldwork we underwent more than one audit of funds, company items like computers, and of personnel, to prove ‘we don’t have any ghost employees on our watch’ (in the words of a Corporate Services official). ‘Ethical’ behaviour was delineated through charts, procedures, and compliance frameworks, which encouraged constant self-monitoring. During a workshop by Human Resources, the team was showed a black and white chart which listed ‘gifts, bribes, close relationships’ as activities not to engage in. An executive said:

You must always ask yourself, “Are you trying to do something that is unethical or illegal?” If you are trying to figure out if you are conflicted, look at this diagram.

Reporting periods were popularly known as the ‘busiest time of year’ and some front-line staff worried about errors, in case of disciplinary hearings. Someone said, ‘Yes, you are human, you are allowed an error here or there, but error upon error...’ She sighed and went on: ‘It’s like you’re basically saying “F you” to your salary.’ Tied to express commitments to ‘proper professional’ and ‘corporate’ behaviour then, was a set of anxieties about job security. Enacting the threat of discipline that came with improper reporting, Johan said at the end of a Friday meeting, sternly:

Guys, audit findings are gonna find themselves in the annual report, and you’re going to have a blemish created in respect of this company. If someone brings this company

into disrepute around a careless mistake, there will be consequences without raising an eyebrow.

Audit culture (Strathern, 2000) has become a common feature in analyses of the corporatisation of the state (for example Bear and Mathur, 2015). But zone company officials' fidelity to behaving like 'corporate' professionals, did not end with a clean audit. Equally it entailed the premise that corporate efficiency could work in harmony with social responsibility. The frameworks of ethical business supplied a concrete set of metrics by which to showcase the zone company's 'successes', even in the absence of meaningful outcomes. They also offered a discursive repertoire through which the company's developmental ethos could be articulated and imagined more broadly.

Ethical business frameworks to prove and imagine company success

As explained earlier, officials referenced 'market inclusion', 'shared value', and international best practice frameworks such as the UNIDO EIP model. At one level, such frameworks supplied metrics by which to adjudicate, and promote, claims about company success. For example, one of the executives, Nick, was particularly invested in converting the EIP framework into a formal rating system that could generate 'interconvertible evidence' of their 'excellent work'; as evidence of the company's mission to be 'lower (zero) carbon', 'resource efficient', and 'socially inclusive'. Nick said enthusiastically, 'Once you have a rating, people get interested, people start buying in, you get traction.' Nick assigned me the role of 'in-house EIP specialist' and asked me to draw up a comprehensive evaluation of how the SEZ scored against all the framework's detailed performance criteria. After I presented to him and others on this work, Nick said he had a 'wild idea' that South Africa could develop an official

EIP rating framework, and the Atlantis SEZ, as a flagship green zone, could administer it. The moment he came up with this idea he picked up his cell phone and called one of South Africa's lead specialists on the EIP framework at the DTIC to introduce the idea. He turned to us after the call:

What we are doing here is not just for Atlantis, not just for the city and Western Cape, but also in a global context. And we are gaining global attention. GIZ is looking at our [community, skills, and enterprise development] work. UNIDO has complemented us on our work. So globally we are also making a difference.

Fidelity to the EIP framework gave Nick a sense that the company was gaining recognition, and even getting 'compliments', on a global stage. The framework's evaluation criteria also offered a chance to foreground the company's efforts at community participation, skills, and enterprise development, measurable signs of social responsibility according to globally sanctioned criteria. This helps to redefine what counts as progress, recasting modest or symbolic forms of engagement (community stakeholder meetings, skills training sessions, small enterprise support) as evidence of movement toward long-term socioeconomic transformation. I discuss each of these themes in greater detail later in the thesis.

The ideals of corporate ethics also offered also a looser discursive reference point through which officials could imagine the company: as having a social and existential mission for improvement, even in the absence of material outcomes. One official said she constantly had to 'wrap [her] head around' the fact that even though their mission was 'to prepare the community for when investment lands, investment hasn't landed yet'. She said, 'All this talk of green tech and investors but it hasn't happened yet.' This kind of contradiction was often managed with reference

to the imagined moral mission, unitary intention, and goals of the company. For example, Johan often made statements in team meetings like:

We are an amazing team of people doing amazing work. I don't think the universe is a complete random place, we are here together, here for a purpose and we can make a real difference here. I am confident that we are about a future – the sustainable future.

Here, 'success' is deferred to the future, based on faith and destiny rather than immediate outcomes. Another official said, with emotion in his voice:

But what do we do now that we are here? Walk away? Or do we double down to make best use of what we have and make something meaningful work? I believe we have set ourselves bold and big goals. We may or may not get there – but they are the right goals. It is worth trying.

The idea of having 'the right goals' substitutes for a critical reckoning with material outcomes in the present, and with the potential of failure. This resonates with Tania Li's (2007, p.2) assessment that improvement schemes are often motivated by a stubborn commitment not to 'just give up'. She argues that this helps to explain why even 'failed' schemes are followed up with new interventions. Here, we see how commitment not to 'walk away' serves as a justification for continued participation in a scheme in the absence of known outcomes.

This articulation of forthcoming (or at least plausible) success drew explicit contrast with earlier, failed state-led interventions in Atlantis. Zone company officials expressed a sincere commitment to 'helping the people of Atlantis', often in existential terms as a 'calling', and as an ethical mandate to rectify the harms caused by apartheid-era industrial decentralisation, now widely deemed as having failed, and as having been immoral. On my first day in the office, one official remarked:

If you want to know how apartheid broke people, come to Atlantis. People were left here for thirty-five years in a hole of sand.

Another described the town as ‘a classic apartheid creation that should never have been here’, expressing excitement at the possibility of ‘making things right’. In this framing, ethical business does not represent a retreat from developmental responsibility, but a corrective to earlier racist and ultimately unsuccessful forms of state intervention.

The company’s identity as an agent of contemporary ideals of ‘inclusion’ and ‘empowerment’ was personified in Johan, whose informal interactions with residents were the subject of emblematic stories that circulated among staff. With his authoritative and likeable demeanour, and history of development successes on projects elsewhere in the country, officials told me how Johan had spent time personally ‘in the community’, talking to people, and earning an informal ‘social licence to operate’ for the SEZ. Noah, the head of the community participation scheme, told me a story which I heard many times subsequently: Johan had once been walking around Witsand, the informal settlement in the wider Atlantis area, where he had asked locals for money to buy chicken feet as a snack (which residents call ‘sunrise’ after a local brand). Noah said, ‘Can you imagine, a skinny white man walking around Witsand and asking for money...’ and burst out laughing. The humour of the story lies in its reversal of longstanding racial and class hierarchies. But the story’s constant repetition gained force from what it symbolised: a willingness to break down social boundaries and enact egalitarian relations and therefore a corrective of apartheid’s earlier racially-stratified paternalism.

Other officials reinforced this portrayal. One recalled Johan insisting that staff should not ‘just look the part but do the job’, discouraging ‘fancy shoes’ in favour of

being 'on the ground, with the community, doing things in overalls'. Through such narratives the zone company is personified as democratic, approachable, and morally attuned – a new kind of institution suited to contemporary development.

Yet Johan was not meant to be the sole bearer of this ethical image. Noah stressed the importance of collective visibility at stakeholder engagements:

Johan and I can't be the only face of the company. They [residents] have to see that there is a whole team behind me that they can rely on and trust.

After one such community engagement, Johan reflected:

I know I have moaned a lot, but at the meeting I sat at the back and had the thought that it's a community that's starting to trust the SEZ company; beginning to see the SEZ as credible people. There will still be moans and groans, but we are on a solid road.

These moments reinforced a sense that community 'trust' itself could stand in as provisional evidence of progress – being on a 'solid road' – in the absence of more concrete outcomes.

If recourse to the language and frameworks of ethical business helps officials to imagine the company as socially responsible and capable of delivering development, they also supply officials with a further set personal and professional reasons for participating in the zone in the everyday. For executives like Nick, enthusiastic commitment to the global EIP framework offered the opportunity for international travel and exposure. During my fieldwork, Nick was invited by the DTIC to represent the South African delegation at an international UNIDO conference, alongside delegations from Vietnam, Indonesia, Ethiopia, South Korea, Peru, Columbia and Egypt. He was very excited that UNIDO had secured money from the Global Environmental Facility (\$4 million of which was allocated to South

Africa's UNIDO facility) and may have imagined that some of that could accrue to Atlantis, under his stewardship. More than just a status-bearing opportunity, the framework offered Nick a concrete means through which to view himself as 'revolutionary':

So, I suppose there is this term being used which is a "revocrat" which is a kind of revolutionary bureaucrat or a bureaucrat which is seeking to be slightly more...*ja* [yes]... I think we have the opportunity to do that here.

For front-line officials, especially those without prior exposure to economic policy or global development discourse, the institutionalised commitment to such frameworks was partly enforced from above. The EIP framework was used to structure the company's long term strategic goals, as laid out in the five-year strategy plans, annual plans, and individual officials' Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) and quarterly plans. Front-line officials' enthusiastic adoption of such frameworks, then, can in part be explained as formalised requirements of their roles. Johan would insist 'I know I complain, but having skills and capital going into the community is non-negotiable.' Voluntary ethical frameworks have been described in ethnographic studies as having their own disciplinary effects, particularly for front-line staff who are imagined by higher-up officials not to have the same knowledge or ethics as the elites who create such frameworks (Blowfield & Dolan 2014; Blowfield & Dolan 2008; Dolan & Rajak 2016; Rajak 2011). In Atlantis, job security was not only tied to audits, but also to staff's demonstrated proficiency, and personal moral attunement, with established 'ethical' frameworks that set the terms of their everyday work.

But beyond mere compliance, such frameworks offered a way of situating their work, and sense of personal 'purpose', within a trajectory of anticipated success, even if its realisation remained uncertain. One official explained how such frameworks

enabled her to see 'how the dots come together to understand where we are going as the SEZ, even if we are not there yet'. She went on:

So, I see my role here as my purpose, even though I was not very familiar with the lay of the land before, now I feel like I know what I must do.

For front-line officials, proficiency with global language and frameworks also offered advantages for personal and career development. While the executives all had university degrees of some kind, and came from either high-level government or corporate jobs, many of the front-line staff had diplomas, for example in Human Resources and office administration. An official from Atlantis explained that they 'would never ever *ever* have imagined that [they] would work for the SEZ', after having applied for a job multiple times before getting one. Another official, also from Atlantis, explained they were worried when they had applied that they would not get the job because it was a 'specialist position'. Someone else described the role as 'the opportunity to start learning how development works internationally', because, as they put it, 'I am always trying to build my CV and just trying to gain some more knowledge.'

For such officials, familiarity with globally legitimate frameworks gave them credibility in their roles, but also in their wider careers. One of the skills development officials quit her role at the zone company during my fieldwork, to take up a job with a global sustainability non-profit based in Cape Town. She explained she had acquired 'such valuable experience and niche knowledge in this job that [she could] take elsewhere', before adding, 'But the ASEZ will always be close to my heart.' Another official left to join a Financial Times 'Fastest-Growing Company in Africa' specialising in renewable energy.

For front-line officials from Atlantis, the doubt about zone success had affective resonances, with implications also in their personal lives and relationships. When I asked whether the zone would be a success, one official from Atlantis, Shané, said steadfastly, ‘It has to. It just has to.’ Shané, who had lived in Atlantis since the age of five, told me openly that she had long been trying to move her children away. She described her own work in existential and emotional terms as ‘necessary’ to deal with a ‘very sad’ situation, where ‘all the kids are now getting into gangsterism and drugs’. For her, frameworks offering the impression of morality, and technical capability, appealed to this personal commitment to improve life in Atlantis ‘for [her] community’ and her own children.

Being associated with a project claiming social improvement and inclusivity in a place characterised by decline and marginality also underpinned her and other Atlantis-based officials’ social reputations and credibility in their community. Lucinda described how important it was to her that the zone officials had a better reputation than the City, for example, by which she knew many Atlantis residents felt neglected. She described herself and her colleagues as ‘the face of the SEZ in the community’ and as ‘the popular girls – everyone wants a piece of us’. She and other colleagues spent much of their workday talking to Atlantis residents who came to the office, informing them personally of the various programmes the zone company offered them, and reassuring them that they ‘really cared’. For her, and other local officials, sustaining official representations of corporate care and success offered not only the chance to build a career and earn a steady livelihood, but also a source of social status in existing personal networks.

In a context where institutional survival is not guaranteed, officials have diverse motivations for continuing to reproduce project plausibility. Officials’ own lives are tied up with diagnoses of the projects’ fate: their job security, status, sense

of personal purpose, and sometimes familial trajectories, and personal social reputations, are implicated. These cumulative personal stakes, given shape through an institutionalised commitment to assembling an 'ethical business', make 'walking away' from the project, or even simply deciding once-and-for-all to view it as a 'failure', potentially very costly.

Conclusion

This chapter has traced how the language and frameworks of ethical business are appropriated by a semi-public institution aiming to sustain representations of developmental effectiveness in the face of limited material success. I began with the political pressure from the DTIC to demonstrate immediate operational progress, amidst criticism of the developmental capacity and financial sustainability of SEZs from National Treasury and elsewhere. I described how provincial actors responded by creating a corporate vehicle, reconfiguring municipal land into a balance-sheet asset, and rapidly reorganising staff and work practices around an institutional form and language of commercial viability. The chapter then examined how officials themselves sustain the company's image as a successful, ethical corporate actor in everyday practice: meticulous audit practices, the adoption of international frameworks, visible community engagements, and the cultivation of charismatic leadership embodied in the CEO and others.

This case complicates two common tropes. First, it introduces to debates about corporate ethicising a new perspective: that the ethical vocabularies and techniques of corporations as development actors do not just legitimise businesses but are being appropriated by public institutions to underwrite their own developmental credentials. Second, when placed in conversation with debates on the

corporatisation of the state, this perspective shows that reformatting the state according to business principles does not amount to a simple abdication of public or developmental responsibility. Rather, it is a rearticulation of that responsibility; one that depends on new modes of corporate ethicising about ‘development’, as much as on maxims of rational efficiency.

In the wider thesis, this chapter examined the nature of the institutional form charged with alleviating mass unemployment today. It explored why and how practitioners continue to participate in the institution’s everyday life, even as the zone does not achieve its goals. The chapter showed that officials’ participation is shaped by diverse motivations and self-understandings, spanning both work and personal life, and bound up with reworked modernist commitments expressed in the language of ethical business. These motivations are further shaped as much by aspirations that the zone should succeed, as by concerns that it might, in the end, fail.

For their own diverse reasons, officials help reproduce the SEZ on the ground and moreover produce narratives, metrics, and documentary evidence that, in spite of the lack of investment to date, the zone is nonetheless on its way to ‘success’ as a generator of market participation. They advance claims about the zone’s plausibility not only among themselves, to manage personal and shared doubts, but also to secure the support and funding of other government actors.

These efforts begin to explain the SEZ’s persistence despite its limited outcomes. But representations of imminent SEZ success are not made by officials alone. To further understand how the zone continues to be depicted, and operate, as though it is plausible, the thesis now turns to focus on another set of actors: consultants. Chapter 3 explores how consultants construct compelling narratives of

the SEZs' investment and job creation prospects, and how they defend these after they fail to materialise in practice.

Chapter 3

Consultant fortune telling: The doubtful construction of economic success



Figure 11: Cover of the first feasibility report (Deloitte, 2014)

The CEO of the Atlantis SEZ preached ‘solid plans in place’ backed by ‘sound expertise’. Since 2013, various teams of consultants had been contracted to devise the economic feasibility and strategy of the SEZ. Their reports provided compelling narratives about the future. These were backed up by an impressive array of charts and technical calculations, attesting to sufficient green technology investment and job creation for the zone to become an economic ‘success’.

Consultants’ reports not only preceded the establishment of the zone company, described in the previous chapter, but also helped politically enable it. These reports underpinned the ministerial decision to designate the SEZ in 2018 and were, alongside the land-for-shares transaction, instrumental in demonstrating to

National Treasury that the zone company could be ‘commercially viable’. By the time I joined the company in 2022, I was sent these reports and told to study what one executive called the ‘founding documents’ of the SEZ – documents said to form part of the project’s ‘DNA’. Another official said of these:

So, if it sounds impressive, it is impressive. Obviously not all of those investors are going to land. Some will drop off, others will come on, and those figures may vary a bit over time. But we are confident. We are building a solid foundation here.

Consultancy reports are clearly significant in the production of the SEZ’s plausibility. They were used to underwrite the launch of the project and they continue to substantiate company officials’ success claims in suitably ‘expert’ terms. Yet, during my fieldwork, I was struck by the fact that none of their projections of investment attraction or job creation had, by this point, actually come true. Moreover, between the first strategy report (published in 2014) and the second (in 2018), recommendations concerning the conditions for zone success shifted markedly. Where the zone was originally meant to be for renewable energy component manufacture, by 2018 the vision expanded to incorporate as broad a range of ‘green tech’ as possible. When I asked a company executive about the validity of consultants’ recommendations, he explained matter-of-factly that ‘any kind of market analysis like that goes out of date very quickly’ and that the company had a legal mandate to update its strategy every five years anyway.

This chapter takes up the apparent conundrum that even as consultants’ forecasts do not materialise, neither their reports, nor their legitimacy as professionals, is disavowed. Consultants continue to be depicted as the most credible experts to make predictions about the zone’s future, and new consultants are brought on to do so, as a matter of institutionalised practice, every five years. The chapter

therefore asks how consultant forecasts and recommendations about a development project like this are produced in practice. Further to this, it asks how consultants acquire the legitimacy to make such predictions, even when their assessments do not always, or even often, come true.

Notwithstanding popular and scholarly stereotypes of consultants as a ‘big con’ (Mazzucato and Collington, 2024) – as lacking substantive expertise – consultants, like other experts, are more often treated as iconic manifestations of the modern will to render a complex and uncertain world more manageable (Alvesson, 1993). Because of this, they are often imbued with the authority to diagnose problems, define solutions, and shape interpretations of reality (Czarniawska-Joerges, 1989; Czarniawska and Mazza, 2012). A growing body of interdisciplinary literature explores how consultants maintain their reputations as ‘experts’ whose services remain in demand. This field, largely focused on management consultants to business, takes as a starting point that consultants are often perceived as having acquired specialised bodies of ‘best practice’ knowledge and skill, which their clients are seen to lack (Boyer, 2008; Carr, Brenneis and Ellison, 2010). Scholars explore how such an impression is produced in practice: through the compelling use of calculations, narratives, and artefacts, like reports and presentations, among other performative strategies (for example Chong, 2018; Clark, 1995; Clark and Salaman, 1998).

Beyond special technical expertise though, demonstrating professional ethics is also a key dimension of consultants’ professional legitimacy. Christopher McKenna (2006, p.200) illustrates that major management consultancy firms in the United States have historically been concerned with conveying ‘professional bearing and ethical standards’. Kimberly Chong (2018), in her ethnography of management consultants in China, takes this further, with a focus on how consultants rationalise

themselves and their work as 'ethical'. She describes the 'moral projects of consultancy' (2018, p.135) whereby consultants justify their own interventions through reference to moral values established as normal within their firms, and by appealing to clients' norms and values. It is through this combination of apparent technical expertise, and normalised 'ethical' standards, that consultants' services remain legitimate and in demand.

Yet to receive equivalent focus is how consultants perform and sustain professional legitimacy in the field of planned socioeconomic improvement, or 'development'. Consultants occupy a distinctive position here. They are routinely called upon to translate political aspirations into credible projections of growth, investment, and employment creation, and to advise on economic strategy for high profile interventions like SEZs.

Consultants in this field are expected not only to provide technical certainty about highly uncertain domains (the economy and the future), but they are also expected to be seen to help with development outcomes, like alleviating poverty and generating employment. Firms, ranging from global behemoths like Deloitte to domestic 'boutique' consultancies, extol their staff's commitment to both cutting-edge expertise and 'ethical practice', presenting their work as helping to address the world's most pressing problems (see for example Deloitte, 2025).

This presents a particular legitimacy dilemma for consultants in the field seeking to sustain professional reputations. On the one hand, consultants are asked to maintain technical credibility by being technically neutral and certain. This is important to maintain 'expert' status across projects and clients in a fast-paced and competitive industry. But, on the other hand, consultants in this field face moral and political pressure to be seen to contribute to economic development, indeed, sometimes to help make projects successful.

This chapter argues that it is in navigating these competing professional demands – for both technical certainty and pro-development, client-friendly optimism – that consultants come to construct evaluations of a development intervention’s economic fate. In Atlantis, when I spoke to consultants about their past projections, their commentary largely took the form of justifications for why they had made the recommendations they had – in relation to these competing demands. Their descriptions of their own work reveal that their ‘expert’ projections of the zone’s future, and their mobilisations of technical knowledge and best practices in crafting these, are bound up with the exigencies of sustaining professional legitimacy in the development consulting industry.

This chapter traces three distinct genres of consultants’ justifications in which ‘best practices’, far from providing technical certainty, are mobilised in very different ways, alongside displays of emotion, and references to artefacts (like contracts, frameworks, and drafts of reports). Following critical perspectives on consultants, which I elaborate further below, I treat these justifications as performances of professionalism, with myself as the audience. Doing so allows us to see how consultants continually adapt their claims about a project’s outcomes according to the shifting conditions under which their professional legitimacy must be continually proven.

These performances, which are not confined to specific firms or consultants, are characterized as follows. First, is what I call ‘client sovereignty’. In this genre, consultants foreground an ethic of meeting client requirements and abiding by the contract (the Terms of Reference (TOR)). Displays of frustration and upset with the TOR, and with clients, defend consultants’ claims to fidelity with globally sanctioned best practices, and attribute past projections to political mandate rather than professional misjudgement. In shifting attention away from the inaccuracies of past

projections to the conditions under which these were made, they preclude final judgement about their own 'expertise', and in doing so, about the outcomes of the zone itself.

Second is 'pragmatic innovation'. Here consultants highlight their creative and exciting use of best practices to work around issues, balancing technical sophistication with responsiveness to client needs, and the imperative of making 'development' work. To shore up the impression of their own certainty and developmental contribution they redirect focus from the zone to a wider hypothetical 'ecosystem', in which, theoretically, the zone could be successful. Displays of conviction and excitement about 'what worked elsewhere' reconceptualise the zone's potential success, even if consultants privately acknowledge such outcomes might not be feasible in this context.

Third is 'technical neutrality'. Finally, consultants can express disillusionment about the prospect of using the zone to address local unemployment, casting this as an impossible structural or 'political' problem that overburdens the available tools of economics. In a fast-paced and competitive industry, the SEZ is merely one project among many, whose outcomes are depicted as of limited importance to the careers of individual consultants themselves. Best practice is staged to preserve a claim to disinterested expertise, recasting unmet expectations, and even what they view as probable zone failure, as an opening for other consultants to 'have a bash'.

Each genre subtly recalibrates the grounds on which the project's outcomes are to be evaluated. Zone strategies are treated as conditional on consultants' contracting conditions, and therefore its outcomes subject to change; abstract hypotheticals keep 'success' theoretically feasible, if practically difficult; and ultimately, technical shortcomings with zone design, even if individual consultants present these as grounds for failure, are treated simultaneously as opportunities for

renewed consultant input. The chapter therefore shows how, even among those who seem to provide the most certain narratives of the zone's success, claims about zone 'success' or 'failure' hardly provide resolution to the question of its future. Consultants are therefore another set of actors for whom this intervention remains suspended between 'success' and 'failure'.

The chapter proceeds as follows. I outline the political and institutional context in which consultants were commissioned. Here I highlight the expectations placed on them to provide credible economic forecasts and strategies to help realise political aspirations to alleviate unemployment in the area, and to help 'get stuff done'. After showing how consultants initially provided compelling narratives of zone success, and explaining why their predictions did not later materialise, I examine the three genres of justificatory performance, concluding each with a discussion of how consultants' evaluations of the zone's fate are bound up with forms of professional self-presentation. But first, I bring an interdisciplinary literature on management and public sector consultants into conversation with perspectives from the anthropology and sociology of economics and development. I use these perspectives to examine the stakes of consultant legitimacy in the development industry and to explore how consultants defend that legitimacy when forecasts fail.

Consultancy as a performance of professionalism

A growing body of literature in management studies, international political economy, and to a lesser degree sociology and anthropology explores how consultants acquire their reputations as competent professionals – trusted to make authoritative judgements about the world and the future. In management studies, the rise of consulting has been linked to the circulation of managerial 'fads', which– shaped by

beliefs in the iterative improvability of knowledge – fuel demand for consulting services as clients often believe in the superiority of consultants’ ‘global’ knowledge (Abrahamson, 1996; Ernst and Kieser, 2002; Fincham and Evans, 1999; Kieser, 2002; Seabrooke and Sending, 2020; 2022; Wright, 2002). Consultants secure contracts – and justify high fees – by presenting themselves as bearers of transferable, internationally recognised expertise.

Yet, lacking the standardised certification of traditional professions like medicine, accounting or law, consultants’ claims to ‘expert’ knowledge, and professional standards more broadly, need constantly to be proven (Kipping, 2011; McKenna, 2006; Muzio et al., 2011). Critical accounts in management studies, sociology, and anthropology ask how consultant expertise becomes socially recognised as such. Given that their expertise often cannot be proven, consultants use various symbolic and persuasive strategies to communicate the impression of their value, and the authority of their knowledge, to clients (Alvesson, 1993; Clark, 1995; Clark and Salaman, 1998; Czarniawska and Mazza, 2012). Language and rhetorical strategies, dress, comportment, and slick and aesthetic presentations among other artefacts (calculations, charts, tables, and graphs), all constitute a compelling performance of expertise (Berglund and Werr, 2000; Bloomfield and Vurdubakis, 1994; Chong, 2018).

But, where much of this literature reinforces the image consultants present of themselves, by depicting their performances as rather infallible, this leaves little room to explore how consultants adapt their performances in situations of high uncertainty, or even in situations where their projections and recommendations fail to come true. There is a marginal current in the debates on consultancies which foregrounds the limits of consultants’ confidence and control. Andrew Sturdy (1997) argues that consultants face a lot of uncertainty in their work, as they must adapt to

clients and managers who may resist their ideas, or resent them, as well as to the pressures within their own firms, for the sake of their own career advancement. In the public sector specifically, others have explored how consultants can be instrumentalised for the political ends of clients over whom they have little control (Jones, 2019; Kirkpatrick et al., 2023), and experience pressure to adjust their behaviours to client norms and values (Chong, 2018).

Indeed, Clark and Salaman (1998, p.27) argue that consultants face a lot of risk in carrying off successful performances:

A key aspect of successful consultancy work is the successful management of risk, promise and opportunity within a particularly highly demanding situation which carries the potential of total and public failure or acclaim.

They draw on Erving Goffman's (1956) influential formulation, which emphasises that performances can easily be disrupted by vagaries such as new information, or unintended events, that challenge the impression of a situation the performer is trying to conjure. Goffman (1956, p.143) suggests that a good performance entails 'defensive' measures to cope with the changing 'character of the props and tasks out of which [one] must build his performance'.

To successfully perform professionalism, then, consultants must adapt to different circumstances, according to different client demands, project requirements, and changing information. But how consultants do this when consulting to the public sector on development projects like the Atlantis SEZ remains to be explored.

The legitimacy dilemma of development consulting

A small but growing critical literature focuses on consultants in public administration, largely in the Global North and in contexts of managerial and policy

reform (Eagleton-Pierce and Knafo, 2020; Lapsley and Oldfield, 2001; Seabrooke and Sending, 2022; van den Berg et al., 2018). This literature has emphasised the power of consultants over public administrations, arguing that they erode internal capacity, among other negative effects (Saint-Martin, 1998; Ylönen and Kuusela, 2019). Less focus has been on the role of consultants in development planning. Consultants are often hired to make economic forecasts and strategy recommendations for development projects on the grounds that they can provide a level of certainty about the future of the economy, and in doing so, can help address politically important problems, like unemployment.

Performing the role of professional economic development consultant in such a setting entails showcasing expert certainty about the economy, and about development, both highly uncertain in practice. While economics derives authority from emulating the natural sciences – deploying scientific language and compelling models that make the world appear as if it follows standardised universal principles (Ferraro, Pfeffer and Sutton, 2005; Fourcade, 2018; Fourcade, Ollion and Algan, 2015; Romer, 2015) – this authority requires work to construct and maintain. In practice, among various kinds of experts, presenting certainty about the economy entails the construction of compelling narratives, and often entails forms of affect, beyond just technical calculation (Chong and Tuckett, 2015; Holmes, 2014; Leins, 2018; 2022).

More generally, economics as a diverse but coherent field is also shown to be socially situated. What economists value, how they enact their roles, and how they gain authority are shaped by national, institutional, and social context (Fourcade, 2009; Fourcade and Khurana, 2013; Frey and Eichenberger, 1993). While less has been written about the institutional and intellectual context of economists in South Africa, all the consultants in this study were trained in high status South African

universities – among them, the University of Cape Town and Stellenbosch University, which are priority recruiting universities for top consulting firms. Beyond pure competence, all the consultants displayed an intimate familiarity with the problems of unemployment and poverty in the country and calibrated their performances of economic expertise according to normative pro-development discourses.

But providing technical certainty on economic development refracts other situated dynamics. If the economy is uncertain, development projects can carry their own uncertainties. Indeed, the anthropology of development shows how the ‘success’ or ‘failure’ of interventions is ambiguous until it is socially constructed as such (Venugopal, 2018). Consultants are often tasked with the important role of diagnosing development interventions as ‘feasible’ or not, and in shaping the terms on which ‘success’ and ‘failure’ are judged. David Mosse (2005), who was himself a long-term consultant advisor to an international aid project in India, argues that consultants produce powerful representations of development projects that influence policy and donor decision making. This is because the kind of knowledge consultants produce can translate the messy reality of project practice into the terms of specialised disciplines, rendering projects legible to outside officials and the public. But these interpretations are not made in a vacuum. They are enmeshed in networks that may seek to reproduce representations of policy ‘success’, to suit political objectives, or to continue flows of funding or political support (Mosse, 2004; 2005). Like impact analysis, forecasting for development projects is always devised for specific audiences and purposes, and may be constrained by a contract, or other core planning documents, which guide what kind of knowledge and detail is considered relevant, or acceptable, to include (Phillips and Edwards, 2000).

This suggests that when devising forecasts, development consultants not only need to present technical certainty, but might also reckon with political pressure to interpret and present evidence in ways that make a development's future look plausible. This helps them to remain socially acceptable to clients and the policy and political community that might have a vested interest in the success of the development. In Atlantis during my fieldwork, the consultants described the pressures they faced in mediating between supposedly technically neutral SEZ best practice and the expectations and political commitments of clients. The way they did so was often defensive, conjuring the impression all the time of their own professional conduct and capabilities.

By conceptualising consultant professionalism and expertise as a performance, my aim is not to imply that consultants are insincere, or that their expertise lacks any substance. No doubt some consultants are cynical. Yet as Goffman (1956, p.10) theorises, performers can also be fully taken in by their own act: 'that the impression of reality which [they stage] is the real reality'. Sincerity aside, through these performances we see how consultant evaluations of forthcoming SEZ success are not fixed or purely technical assessments, but are continually negotiated in relation to professional norms, contractual constraints, and shifting political expectations.

In my conversations with them, consultants' earlier projections of SEZ success were heavily moderated in hindsight; and some consultants even claimed to view the SEZ as a probable failure. But, taking a longer view of their involvement, we see that consultants' estimations of the project's fate shift according to their persistent needs for legitimacy. As a consequence, consultants do not provide authoritative interpretive closure for the future of the project. Instead, in their bids to present themselves as legitimate in the context of their careers, consultants shift the terms of

evaluating project outcomes over time. Thus, we see how, in practice, even amongst those one might expect to have the most certain views on the zone's status, the zone is cast as situated somewhere between 'success' and possible 'failure'.

Before I introduce the three genres of performance I witnessed from consultants to the Atlantis SEZ, I now introduce the context in which these took place, to establish empirically the stakes for consultants' professional legitimacy in this field.

Establishing the SEZ's feasibility: Hiring consultants for 'credibility factor'

Before the SEZ was designated, and before the zone company was even established, there was a network of provincial supporters for an SEZ in Atlantis. This section explains how consultants were brought on to provide credibility for this vision, even as their forecasts were not later borne out. It provides the context for a critical understanding of consultants' defensive performances, described later in the chapter, in which their original projections of zone success are heavily caveated.

The DTIC, Western Cape's DEDAT, and certain officials from the City of Cape Town, and the local non-profit GreenCape, all rallied around developing a 'good business case' for the Atlantis SEZ.⁸¹ In 2013, the DTIC issued a Request for Proposals (RFP) inviting consultants to complete (pre)feasibility studies and a strategy plan to demonstrate the zone's 'strong economic potential and attractiveness to investors', in the words of one official. The potential SEZ in Atlantis was listed alongside six other potential zones:

⁸¹ To remind the reader, at the time, the DTIC was called the Department for Trade and Industry.

- 1) Platinum Hub, Rustenburg-North West – [Technical feasibility study and Strategic plans]
- 2) Petro-chemicals, agro-processing and logistics hub, Musina – Limpopo – [Pre-feasibility, Technical feasibility studies and Strategic plans]
- 3) Trade and Agro-processing hub, Dube Trade Port- KZN – [Pre-feasibility study and Strategic plans]
- 4) Agro-processing and Tourism hub, Umtata -Eastern Cape – [Pre-feasibility, Technical feasibility studies and Strategic plans]
- 5) Agro-processing and Trade hub, Nkomazi-Mpumalanga – [Pre-feasibility, Technical feasibility studies and Strategic plans]
- 6) Agro-processing and Logistics hub, Harrismith-Free State – [Pre-feasibility, Technical feasibility studies and Strategic plans]
- 7) Renewable Energy hub, Atlantis-Western Cape – [Pre-feasibility, Technical feasibility studies and Strategic plans]. (DTIC, 2013)⁸²

In the case of Atlantis, the DTIC had prior instructed DEDAT to choose a location, and sector focus, for a potential provincial SEZ. DEDAT, together with the City of Cape Town, settled definitively on the idea of a green technology SEZ in Atlantis. A City official explained, ‘Atlantis was already a focus area for the City.’ Unemployment in Atlantis had been declared a political crisis in a report to the city’s Executive Mayoral Committee as early as 2011. A City official recalled:

We were stuck with a bit of a dilemma – what do you do with something that is 45 km outside of the city? How do you connect it with the Cape Town economy? How do you provide proper jobs and employment opportunities in Atlantis?

By 2013, the provincial and city governments, with the help of GreenCape (which specialises in renewable energy market analysis), had already been devising a solution. They had plans to set up a ‘Renewable Energy Hub’ to produce renewable energy components. Therefore, when the DTIC reached out to the province to choose

⁸² This RFP was obtained by this author from one of the bidding consultants.

a location for a provincial SEZ, it was apparently clear that Atlantis would be an ideal location for a 'green tech' SEZ. In the words of an official from DEDAT:

So, while all that was happening [the establishment of the Renewable Energy Hub] the [DTIC] said they were interested in setting up SEZs and the province said, "OK, well we did all this this work in Atlantis so let's do a green tech one there."

Another DEDAT official described this as 'a bit of a slam dunk':

I don't want to say it was a no brainer but basically the set of momentum that existed was such that it was hard to see how any other choice would be made.

She went on:

It was really in the conversations we had with the City that Atlantis was chosen. The City did influence it a little bit partly because they had a hell of a lot of land in Atlantis which was really underutilised... and because of the history of Atlantis. Do you know it was meant to be a Coloured Homeland? It had... its community origins... they knew what welding and fitting was... so you have a reservoir of underutilised skills. And basically, the City was worried about what was happening to the community.

Officials from DEDAT, the City, and GreenCape worked together on provisional justifications of the 'strong market case' for having a green tech SEZ in Atlantis. An official from DEDAT explained:

I got told that we were putting forward Atlantis as a potential SEZ and can I please write the motivation to the [DTIC]. It wasn't a five-line letter. It explored the benefits of being located in Atlantis and the set of advantages already in place from the City side. So, it was a well-considered motivation.

The officials cited a strong and growing South African market for green technology, including for renewable energy components. The national Department of Energy's

(DOE) Renewable Energy Independent Power Producer Procurement (REIPPP) programme was a supporting factor as, in 2015, the DOE announced an additional 6.3 gigawatts of renewable energy procurement from private producers. The officials also explained that Atlantis was in a 'strategic location' for business, between Cape Town (forty kilometres) and Saldanha Bay harbours (105 kilometres). Provincial officials further described Atlantis as a key node in a planned 'West Coast corridor'. A DEDAT official told me, 'The city will grow, and it can't grow north, there are mountains there, so it has to grow west.' 'Even though,' she admitted, 'that's decades away.' The City was also prepared to offer assistance, including fast-tracked development approvals for land use and building plan applications, fast-tracked environmental impact assessments, and a municipal electricity tariff subsidy. Finally, they cited the available labour force, and 'legacy skills' in the area, including semi-skilled and technical and professional candidates.

To validate this 'market case', in 2013, the RFP was issued by the DTIC inviting consultants to complete (pre)feasibility studies and a strategy plan over the course of nine months. Consultants were hired for their specialist tools and perceived 'credibility factor'. An official said:

You could probably do some of it, but because it's done by KPMG or Deloitte or Ernst & Young, people believe it and they listen to it. Because they've got the tools, they've modelled it beautifully, and you know, a lot of it is based on assumptions, but it's them. So, people will back it. And you can get stuff done off the back of something like that. It's a credibility factor, I guess.

Here we see that consultants were brought on to validate an existing political commitment: to address unemployment in Atlantis through a green tech SEZ. The official explained that consultants' work helps 'get stuff done' because it is well

presented and perceived as more reliable than what officials could produce on their own. But how do consultants project such credibility in a context like this?

Consultants stage technical certainty and economic optimism

A team of consultants from Deloitte South Africa's Economics Advisory branch won the bid. They were drawn to the tender because, in the words of one of their team, they wanted to be part of 'developing a new industrial policy idea' and because they thought it 'would be interesting to work on, and an important space to be in'. They described this 'space' as a site to demonstrate their own technical savoir. A Deloitte consultant said:

When there was something economic policy-related, it would come to us, forwarded by someone else in the firm. Of the consultants in the 3000-person office, we were probably the best placed to have a look at it and decide if we wanted to take it on. We liked the idea of a green technology manufacturing zone in Atlantis. We thought we could bring our own research here on international lessons and best practices.

But helping establish a green tech SEZ would also actualise their commitments to 'development', framed here as the 'revitalisation' of Atlantis through employment creation. A consultant on Deloitte's team, Deepti, said:

I never saw the brief to choose locations, but it was chosen by the Western Cape government in light of their policy of revitalisation of Atlantis. That was the thing about this area; there was already a need to fundamentally incorporate the people in the area. That's the whole point of setting up the SEZ actually – unemployment is high in Atlantis.

Their motivation to work on important development questions like this was elaborated in accounts of why they went into development consulting in the first place. Deepti, who had worked in investment banking in Johannesburg before, said:

But while I was in that environment I really missed being closer to the applied side of economics and solving actual problems or doing actual work that would have a direct sort of impact.

She continued:

What I enjoy about my job, about econ and I guess development consulting specifically, is it's often solving more than just a business challenge. It's some kind of socioeconomic or policy challenge. Not just helping "company X" sell more of "gadget Y".

Deloitte South Africa's Economic Advisory, drawing on the same language of the company's global mission statement, officially reinforces this message that consultants have not only 'cutting-edge' skills, but a wider ethical mandate or 'purpose'. The home page of its website announces:

Our economic rigour comes from our cutting-edge analytic tools, combined with our experience in working with business and governments, enhanced further by the expertise of our people and our commitment to purpose for prosperity... [We combine] foresight with sophisticated analysis to shape and unlock economic, environmental, financial and social value (Deloitte, 2026).

Deloitte's claims to superior, global expertise and professional standards more broadly are here calibrated according to wider normative discourses about 'impact' and 'doing good', so prevalent in contemporary capitalism (Barry, 2004; Leins, 2020). Stefan Leins (2020) argues that investment bankers draw on the language of 'responsible' and 'impact driven' investment and convert it into a financial strategy.

Here we see how publicised claims about socioeconomic impact serve as a contemporary marketing strategy for consultancy firms; as a discursive framework through which to articulate their ‘value’ to clients.

Claims about adding value are shored up with reference to economics as a field of expertise. Deepti explained that her team’s skills were needed on the Atlantis project because their public clients:

Needed our set of professional expertise, both on the market analysis side, which is the value we brought, and economic policy work.

The consultants substantiated their ties to the field of economics through their professional curricula vitae (CVs), attached to the bid. Deepti herself held an MCom (economics) cum laude and BCom (hons) from two different prestigious South African universities. She also had a decade of experience across economics, strategy, and statistics, with specialised technical skills like econometrics, statistical modelling, and financial modelling and evaluation.

Consultants are expected to demonstrate these professional credentials in their interactions with clients. The nine-month Atlantis SEZ project involved frequent meetings with clients in Cape Town. DTIC staff flew in from Pretoria to chair meetings. Deepti recalled that GreenCape, then the Project Management Unit, proposed a close working relationship, including sharing early drafts. Ultimately though, this proved difficult because it exposed the ad-hoc nature of the consultants’ work. Deepti laughed sheepishly, remembering:

That close working relationship didn’t work out well for us as consultants because they reacted very badly to the rough work... And I was like, “But it’s meant to be rough?!” So, then we decided we would just share more sort of finalised drafts that were more polished and what I call “client ready”.

To appeal to client expectations, they switched to sharing final reports and PowerPoint slides. As Chong (2018) argues, PowerPoint presentations are crucial props in the production of professionalism, in part because they substantiate expertise. But the switch to sharing only ‘polished’ work was also a strategy to hide contingency, and uncertainty, from view (see also Best, 2022).

In the final reports that the Deloitte consultants produced in 2014, they left out various uncertainties and concerns (which I will address later), presenting a more optimistic forecast. The reports declared the SEZ economically feasible, envisioning it as a renewable energy manufacturing hub serving the domestic market, then thriving due to the public procurement of renewable energy from private producers under the REIPPP. The introductory paragraph of the final feasibility study reads:

After an extensive analysis of the green tech market in South Africa and the potential of Atlantis to attract a share of the firms that will serve that market, we concluded that demand would be sufficient to support the development of a small-scale green tech SEZ (Deloitte, 2014, p.15).

It justified this claim with a narrative about the REIPPP:

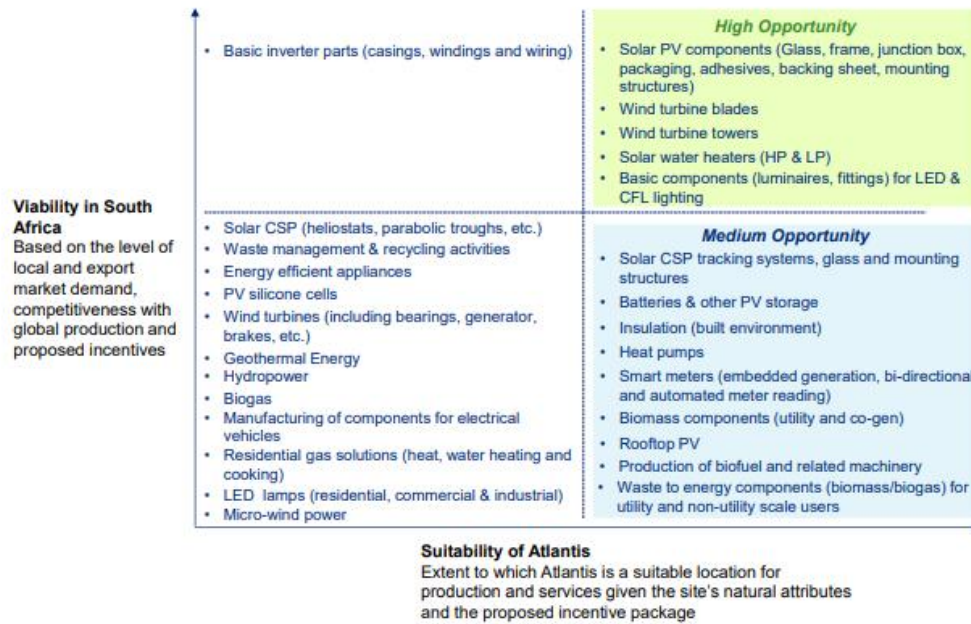
The demand for locally manufactured components for utility-scale renewable energy in South Africa is driven by the REIPPP programme which sets out the allocations for renewable energy generation technologies and provides opportunities for investment through a competitive bidding process. Local content thresholds and targets stipulated within the REIPPP bidding process are generating demand for locally manufactured components and related services (Deloitte, 2014, p.15).

This summarises in narrative form what the rest of the report aimed to demonstrate through the staging of calculation and ‘economic fact’. What followed were over two

hundred pages of detailed text, with definitions and a dizzying multi-page list of acronyms in the beginning, and appendices with extra information and calculations at the end. The analysis was substantiated in each section with frameworks, diagrams, and tables with apparently mutually exclusive and exhaustive categories to convey a sense of comprehensive knowledge and rigorous analysis. A SWOT analysis and market sizing analysis (which claimed to assess the ‘comparative advantages’ of Atlantis, and to ‘unpack value chains’), built up to two ‘demand scenarios’, entailing ‘conservative’ and ‘moderate’ levels of projected investment and job creation.

Industrial activity was predicted to take off in the zone in the ‘short-term’ (2014 to 2017) and ‘medium-to-long term’ (2018 to 2030). In the first period, the zone was instructed to focus on solar water heaters, components for wind and solar, and certain basic lighting components. In this timeframe the zone was to ‘promote the “clustering” of these activities to foster greater collaboration and development of green tech activities in future’ (Deloitte, 2014, p.53). The vision for the ‘medium-to-long term’ was to ‘attract green tech firms and 14 medium and small firms with a host of smaller suppliers creating 1 440 direct and permanent jobs’ (Deloitte, 2014, p.53). It was concluded that ‘the majority of these positions could be filled by Atlantis residents thereby contributing to the upliftment of people in the area’ (Deloitte, 2014, p.53).

Figure 11 Overall greentech opportunity prioritisation



Source: Deloitte analysis

Figure 12: Feasibility Report Extract (Deloitte, 2014, p.49)

Table 10 Size of likely uptake, conservative and moderate scenarios

Firm Size	Conservative				Moderate			
	Large	Medium	Small	Total	Large	Medium	Small	Total
No. greentech firms	2	5	3	9	2	11	6	18
No. of greentech suppliers	-	3	7	10	-	3	8	11
Direct permanent jobs created per year	550	370	140	1 060	550	690	200	1 440
Industrial floor space required, m ²	41 000	30 500	9 100	80 600	41 000	60 500	11 100	112 600
FDI, million	R500	R100	-	R600	R500	R150	-	R650

Source: Deloitte analysis

Figure 13: Feasibility Report Extract (Deloitte, 2014, p.53)

After Deloitte’s first feasibility and strategy reports, other teams of consultants devised calculations of likely future investment, job creation, and economic growth, that would come from the Atlantis SEZ. These calculations underwrote convincing strategy narratives about the SEZ vis-à-vis global green technology markets. Officials involved in the process described their work as ‘sufficient and compatible with

success’, and they explained that ‘it really served its purpose of getting the zone designated’. Officials used the original Deloitte reports to argue for the SEZ’s official designation, a public company to run it, and public funding, all in anticipation of predicted future success.

But, while consultant knowledge is clearly influential in authorising development projects, this is not necessarily due to its accuracy. Indeed, over time, Deloitte’s forecasts did not hold. This was in part due to delays to the REIPPP under President Zuma (Yelland, 2017), which slowed the anticipated demand for locally manufactured renewable energy components. The zone strategy of being a hub for local content for renewable energy was no longer viable. A new consulting team was hired in 2017 to re-strategise, broadening the focus from renewable energy component manufacture specifically to a wider definition of ‘green technology’. Their forecasts too, had largely not materialised by the time I interviewed them.

How consultants justify past projections in such a context of manifest uncertainty, when past forecasts have largely failed to materialise, is the focus of the remainder of the chapter. It shows that even among those who once presented the zone’s future as fairly certain, evaluations of its outcomes are conditional on a persistent need for professional legitimacy in a competitive career.

The importance of client sovereignty

One genre of economic development consultants’ performances centres on a professional commitment to cultivating good client relationships. Clients may have prior political objectives – in this case solving unemployment in Atlantis through a green tech SEZ – which consultants must ultimately support under the contract (TOR) to secure payment. While consultants bring best practice knowledge – here,

‘SEZ economics’ – clients choose whether to follow it. Frustration directed at the TOR and at clients allows consultants to signal adherence to best practice and to attribute past projections to political constraint rather than technical miscalculation. These forms of self-presentation shift the grounds for evaluating their earlier projections of optimism: these are no longer to be judged against their non-realisation, but rather, understood through attention to the conditions in which consultants worked. In doing so, consultants attempt to foreclose finite judgements about their own expertise, in turn foreclosing finite evaluations of the zone’s status.

This performance crystallised when consultants from Deloitte talked about the pre-feasibility study they were contracted to do for the SEZ in 2013. ‘It was upsetting that there was very little scope. The area had been chosen by the province,’ one said. The consultants explained how they had gone to great lengths to contract an SEZ expert from the World Bank to assist them. He had recommended that SEZs need to be in strategic locations, but, the consultants insisted, their clients had not taken this advice on board. Deepti said:

So, for example in the pre-feasibility study we went through some examples or principles of a successful design of SEZs. I brought in a guy who I had met through my Deloitte colleagues who was a World Bank expert on SEZs. So we did this workshop on SEZ best practice and essentially, we got his input there. Like for example a recommendation was: attempts to attract investors to remote areas with generous incentives often lead to costly overinvestments. Revitalization of economically distressed urban and rural areas is often a key rationale for many SEZ programs in the UK, France, and the US but experience suggests that good site location is an extremely important determinant of SEZ success. So, you know, he recommended that SEZs needed to be at strategic locations like near an airport or port with good road connections, low transport costs, etc.

She continued:

So, we started with like, “Oh no!”, because Atlantis from my perspective wasn’t a preferred location in the Cape Town metropolitan area for a manufacturing-oriented SEZ. It’s too far from the ports, it’s too far. It’s not the A-grade space if you like. And the province’s exact rationale had been to revitalise an area that had become economically distressed, which good practice suggested was not a great idea.

The consultants emphasised that at this ‘pre-feas’ stage, they conveyed in informal conversations with the DTIC the potential risks of having an SEZ in Atlantis. Deepti said, ‘The pre-feasibility was more like the one where we were still exploring concepts and learnings. So, we highlighted a few key challenges of the Atlantis site.’ She sighed, explaining, ‘It was clear to us as consultants that it was going to be difficult to make it work.’ Ultimately, while consultants grounded their own self-presentation, ‘as consultants’, in the insights of international best practice, which suggested it would be ‘difficult to make [the SEZ] work’, they emphasised that ultimately it was up to clients whether to follow this advice.

They described being bound, in terms of what they could deliver, by their clients’ demands. They were required to stick to the TOR and scope of work for which they were hired. Deepti said:

You know we were stuck with that because that was the way the whole project had been set up, the way the TOR was set up, and the way that the [DTIC] had commissioned the feasibility studies. They went to the provinces and asked them to each choose one site without giving input on best practice or what not. And then we had to take it from there. It was frustrating.

In this genre of performance, the TOR, while causing ‘frustration’, is staged as a key artefact which circumscribes the kinds of knowledge consultants can produce. This is particularly the case for juniors. Sam described not being in a position to influence the scope of work:

I was junior, just out of my master's. So, I think I put it down to that a little more. I felt like I could raise a lot of issues, but I don't know if they had any influence more than just being aware of issues.

But this sense of restricted agency was repeated by those in more senior positions. Deepti described the work as a 'tick box exercise'. She said, raising her hands in exasperation:

The way they commissioned the strategy, like the TOR, there were all these components we had to produce even though it didn't feel relevant. We were asked to do something for each and every item that was on the list of deliverables whether or not we thought it was going to add value. So, we couldn't just work in a way that felt intuitive to us.

Alongside best practice, consultant 'intuition' is depicted as a key quality of expertise that, in engagements with clients, can be constrained, such that consultant reports do not truly reflect their capabilities. Instead of following an approach they could have devised themselves, based on what '[feels] relevant', the consultants had to follow 'each and every item' stipulated by the client. A member of the team noted this imperative stemmed from payment conditions in a public sector contract:

You know, like, with a public tender if you don't do the commercial plan, *blahblah*, then you don't get paid.

While frustrated by the apparent constraints on their abilities to produce the best quality work, they blamed this on pre-existing political commitments among clients to fast-track SEZ designation. Sam said:

It was kind of like, a frustration that was left with me after we closed off the project. That there were elements that we could have addressed better had it not been for a

push to get it done, rather than to get it done well. That was kind of the frustration whenever we met with stakeholders who were like, “Don’t think too hard about it, we just need to get going.”

He smirked, continuing more seriously, ‘No one actually said that but that was the sentiment.’ The consultants argued that they were being recruited to get the project ‘over the line’, not to deliver the most rigorous analysis. Such a sacrifice of technical prowess was justified on the grounds of meeting clients’ demands and expectations. As Sam put it, ‘We stuck to our deadlines. We had a good relationship with them.’

Where reports have been analysed as key symbolic artefacts to substantiate consultant professionalism (for example Clark and Salaman, 1998), in this case, a decade on, these reports posed a ‘dramaturgical problem’ (Goffman, 1956, p.8), in the sense that they did not convey the intended impression of quality expertise. To adapt to this situation, consultants brought earlier drafts into front-stage view, which they claimed better attested to their own awareness of ‘the risks’. Deepti said:

The feasibility and the strategy were made publicly available on their website. But I think the initial one, where we had more cautions I suppose, was not made available. And they didn’t publish the reports where we told them the risks.

Blaming clients for deficiencies in the technical quality of their published reports relies on stereotypes of consultants as having superior expertise. Indeed, the consultants represented their public sector clients as explicitly lacking the capacity to draft proper TORs, and to properly evaluate consultant ‘deliverables’. One said:

As consultants, it’s often quite frustrating responding to a poorly written TOR. And it’s frustrating as a consultant if there is not that much capability on the other side to actually evaluate your deliverables or the quality of them.

In this genre, consultants redirect attention from their past unrealised projections to the contractual and political conditions under which those projections were produced. By foregrounding fidelity to the TOR, and the constraints imposed by clients, the consultants not only defer judgment of their own reputations as ‘experts’, but they advance a recurring counterfactual: that under different commissioning conditions, and with more capacitated clients, more rigorous or strategically aligned recommendations, and more helpful forecasts, could have been delivered. Through this move, the status of the zone as a ‘success’ or ‘failure’ vis-à-vis earlier projections is neither confirmed nor repudiated. While consultants emphasise that they had always thought the zone would be ‘difficult to make work’, the fact that they had chosen to work on it earlier, along with their emphasis on their own professional competence, leaves open the possibility that under altered conditions the project might have had, and may still have, different outcomes.

Foregrounding pragmatic innovation

According to another genre of professional performance, consultants should recognise the developmental importance of a flagship project and strive to ‘make it work’ on technical grounds for the sake of good client relationships, as well as ‘development’ and ‘social justice’. Animated references to ‘exciting’ best practices, technical tools like ‘taxonomies’, and what ‘worked elsewhere’, reaffirm the project’s potential success, even if only in the abstract, as consultants privately acknowledge their recommendations might not be feasible in this context.

Deloitte’s earlier feasibility had hinged on the REIPPP, which later faced delays. In 2017, a new team from a Johannesburg-based boutique economics

consultancy, SustainabilityCo, was brought in.⁸³ Their lead said, ‘I could appreciate they needed a review.’

Pragmatism was central here: the consultants expressed an imperative to try to render an existing project technically sound, despite known challenges. Dan, a junior on the team, said:

I don’t see Atlantis as being able to compete with true green tech hubs. If it was there are so many things that would change about it – it would be closer to a port, for example. Ultimately what I believe is that it is a social development or social justice tool. Because it’s all set up now, it’s all there. I think there are more effective economic development tools for an area like that, but the SEZ is there so we needed to make it work.

Others repeated this ethos more cynically, calling it ‘the troubled world of second best’. Jennifer said:

I guess at that point we were like, “What is the best possible strategy?” Not, “Is this still feasible?” but “What is the best possible strategy assuming the SEZ is kind of going ahead?” That was sort of the brief. It was like, “We are committed!” So, in the troubled world of second best, we had to think what could possibly work. *Ja*. So, it was difficult.

Many on the Deloitte team had taken up this ethos earlier, in the pre-feasibility stage. Deepti explained they had highlighted ‘the risk of a white elephant’ and recommended reusing existing infrastructure as an innovative solution, which ‘worked in Poland’. She said:

Because we got the sense that the opportunity, you know, might be quite narrow, that we should make use of existing infrastructure. It may not be a massive zone given the

⁸³ The name of the firm has been changed.

constraints, but we think you can make it work if you are smart about using underutilized infrastructure.

At this her tone became far more animated. She continued, ‘We even had more wild ideas like you could have borderless, designated, bigger areas.’ But, she explained, this had led to a long bout of conflict among the major stakeholders, with the DTIC eventually rejecting the proposal because the SEZ concept was designed around ‘greenfields and new builds’.

SustainabilityCo consultants emphasised that getting clients to adopt novel approaches required ‘educating clients in economics’, which required pushing back on clients’ expectations. Dan said:

We ended up butting heads with a few people as well just in terms of trying to bring officials down to earth in terms of what was *realistic* in the context of South Africa. In terms of the manufacturing competitiveness of the country. So, you know there are many areas of manufacturing where we cannot be competitive globally. We are never going to be the [solar] PV panel producer of the world. One woman at province kept saying, “We need a semiconductor for South Africa, that’s what we need you to find.” So, we did a bit of an intro to manufacturing competitiveness and the factors that constrain it in South Africa.

To act as proper professionals meant finding technical workarounds that ‘interested’ and even ‘excited’ them. They explained how they developed a broader ‘green tech taxonomy’ to broaden the scope away from renewable energy, which made sense in a wider best practice framing of ‘knowledge ecosystems’. This approach had worked in France and elsewhere, they said. Jennifer explained, enthusiastically:

One of the big takeaways was really that you were unlikely to build a big green tech manufacturing hub in Atlantis unless you stimulated R&D [Research and

Development] or innovation. So that was *frustrating*. But I think what really did *excite* me, in terms of the strategy review, and excited [my team] as well, was having a look at green tech innovation ecosystems. And we really thought, “Gosh it could be possible to really get something like that going in the Western Cape.” We were quite inspired by the idea of a green tech ecosystem to potentially create a pipeline for the SEZ in future. You really need idea generation, selection, and incubation. So that was one of the main findings, or recommendations, that as consultants we wanted to bring home, and as economists.

Chong and Tuckett (2018) and Leins (2018) explain how, despite economic uncertainty, finance experts create narratives that convince of their expertise. To create these narratives requires constant social and emotional processes that shift actors from doubt and fear to positive estimations of potential future financial gain. In this case, the consultants displayed such emotional transformation to shore up an impression of conviction in their own technical competence ‘as economists’. Frustration about the zone’s constraints is turned into excitement about its potential through narratives about the innovative use of best practice, entailing more expansive modelling techniques.

The best practice idea of ‘knowledge ecosystems’, which hails from management theory, here allows practical issues with the SEZ to be decentred, replaced with a more exciting hypothetical reality (of a green tech ecosystem) in which zone success appears more likely. Jennifer exclaimed:

An ecosystem here in the Western Cape could support that kind of innovation, but the SEZ would almost be like a downstream bit, or a very small piece of that entire puzzle.

Speaking to her years later, when a ‘knowledge ecosystem’ had yet to develop around the SEZ, she said that while in theory her recommendations made sense, she acknowledged that these recommendations might be ‘tricky’ to implement in

practice. She admitted that while GreenCape had been ‘very excited’ about the idea, ultimately, it would be difficult for them to achieve. First, because ‘Atlantis isn’t anywhere near universities or an R&D hub as such’, and moreover, because what her team had recommended went far beyond the scope of the SEZ in terms of implementation. She said:

It’s just a bit of a leap I guess because the guys who are told to attract investment into the SEZ have got their KPI already. You would need another set of KPIs. So, it’s tricky but that was the recommendation.

Others have argued that economic language and models gain global influence by developing a ‘wholly separate and artificial reality... [which] gets confused with, and eventually replaces, reality’ (Fourcade 2018 p.3), a process otherwise described as ‘decontextualization’ (Bear et al., 2015). In this case, reference to a hypothetical plausible reality in which best practice prevails in Atlantis, as it has elsewhere in the world, offers consultants the grounds to showcase their own professional commitments, to both technical prowess and pro-development aspirations. More than this, through such justifications of past forecasts, despite these not having been realised in practice, consultants frame the SEZ as plausible. They offer a set of internationally recognised conditions under which the zone might still be a success in future, even if they privately acknowledge it might be practically infeasible to achieve such conditions in practice.

Asserting technical neutrality

A third genre of performance revolves around claiming technical neutrality. Consultants stage best practice not in service of developmental goals, but to reinforce their own claims to technical competence and certainty ‘as economists’.

Unemployment and deindustrialisation in Atlantis are framed as issues that overflow the scope of what SEZ best practice can reasonably address. In this genre, evaluations of the zone's inevitable failure (on technical grounds) work to distance consultants from the SEZ's outcomes. Instead, consultants foreground their individual career trajectories, in which the SEZ is just one project among many. Even if they refuse to work on it, they recognise that others will. Through this performance of technical neutrality, even as these specific consultants diagnose the zone an inevitable failure, it is framed as awaiting renewed consultancy intervention.

A consultant at SustainabilityCo, reflecting on the Atlantis SEZ years after working on it, said:

Basically, the overall problem with the Atlantis SEZ is that SEZs should be in strategic positions but this SEZ really exists as an industrial zone to rectify poverty and that sort of thing. Which basically sets you back *massively* when it comes to your strategic benefits. That's just clear as an economist.

These kinds of narratives, that emphasise the clarity of economic knowledge, allow consultants to craft an impression of themselves as certain about the economy and the future. Moreover, in depicting the zone as an object of technical knowledge and intervention, they background questions of 'poverty and that sort of thing', as if these issues are beyond consultants' purview unless they are readily solvable through available tools.

Similarly aligning herself to her technical knowledge as an economist, one of the consultants described the developmental impetus of the SEZ as 'unreasonable' within the scope of an SEZ policy. She insisted:

So, I almost feel like it's trying to accomplish too many things with one policy: revitalisation of Atlantis, upliftment of the community, creating employment,

stimulating green tech innovation *and* supporting local manufacturing. It's all just too much! Too much for an SEZ policy to reasonably try to achieve.

Here, consultants' expertise is not questioned; it is the case at hand, and officials' developmental aspirations, that overburden best practices.

In their conversations with me, many of the consultants condemned the SEZ along similar lines – largely because it was seen to conflict with international best practice. Deepti said, sighing:

I'm sceptical from my perspective as an economist if it can work in its current format given everything that I learnt from the likes of [the World Bank expert] and international best practice. So, in my view they are not strategic enough in terms of location, and secondly, they are not special enough. The incentives that are provided by government are not gonna fundamentally make you set up a manufacturing enterprise there instead of elsewhere in South Africa. In fact, a lot of people said to me even with the cheap rates and the cheap rental they would rather put their plant in Montague because it's nicer. And because it's closer to the port.

Deepti's list of issues with the zone, alongside her negative judgement of whether it could 'work', is tantamount to an informal diagnosis of zone failure. Yet her logic draws on the same set of issues she claimed she had raised with her clients from the beginning, after which her team had devised a host of much more optimistic projections and recommendations. For those who had worked on the SEZ previously, this show of technically-sound scepticism can therefore be read as defensive – shielding consultants from potential reputational risks of being associated with optimistic projections and strategies that did not later materialise. Moreover, treating the diagnosis as a matter of purely technical or economic best practice criteria with clearly defined boundaries helps disentangle the consultants from the

political conditions that initially conditioned their involvement, and earlier projections.

Consultants distanced themselves from the project and its outcomes in other ways. Sam concluded our interview with an exasperated laugh, before saying:

Sorry for being so negative! I really enjoyed doing the project, by the way. I learnt so much. It's all part of the joys of being a consultant; the challenge and variety.

Here, he shifts the focus from his own involvement in the SEZ, and from its outcomes, to his own professional development as a consultant who works on many different projects. The consultants emphasised that they enjoyed the 'fast-paced' nature of their work because it meant 'you never get bored of your job' and 'you are constantly learning'. In a fast-paced and competitive industry, the SEZ is portrayed as merely one project among many, whose outcomes are of limited personal importance to individual consultants themselves.

The consultant's career is described with peppy language and tone as exciting and full of momentum, in contrast to the struggles of the project, in the aftermath of consultants' work. Indeed, Deepti told me:

I've spoken to some Atlantis people at conferences and whatever since we did our work and it's very clear to me that they are still struggling.

Taken to its extreme, some consultants said that they felt they should simply refuse to work on projects of this nature, that fail to meet best practice criteria. Again, these consultants had not in fact rejected the work at an earlier stage but were adapting their performances now to manage and conceal the uncertainty they dealt with throughout. Sam said:

But in terms of my eventual feeling of would I want to do another SEZ project, I would say in this current context, with the current policy and approach, the answer is “No”.

Dan said he considered bidding for another round of feasibility and strategy work on an SEZ elsewhere in the country but decided against it. He said of this other SEZ:

It was like far more remote than Atlantis, far less going for it, and I was like, “No. I can’t deal with this.”

They characterised the project not as a chance to make an important contribution to ‘development’, but as a technical problem that they had tried their hand at in the broader arc of their professional careers. Jennifer said:

When the third one [RFP for a strategy for the Atlantis SEZ] came out I didn’t bid. They mailed again last year and invited us, but I thought, “Ah no, not another SEZ strategy.” I just said to my colleagues, “I don’t think it’s the best use of my time.” I didn’t want to spend the next month flogging a dead horse basically.

Here, Jennifer expressed intense disillusionment about the Atlantis SEZ, depicting it as an inevitable failure or ‘dead horse’. This damning characterisation of the zone, though, has a double function in helping shore up a legitimising self-representation. It reinforces her professional image as a consultant whose ‘time’ is valuable and could be better spent on the next, more promising, project.

Informal insinuations of zone failure in this case do not operate as official denunciations, either of their own earlier optimism, nor of the zone project in its entirety. Indeed, far from insisting that the zone project should be terminated because of the technical issues they identified, the consultants suggested that the project was an opportunity for other consultants to contribute their input. After her comment about not wanting to ‘[flog] a dead horse’, Jennifer said:

Maybe it's time for somebody new to give it a bash. Because I don't know how much more value I can add at this point.

Even the starkest denunciations of the zone as an inevitable failure are conditioned on consultants' pursuit of legitimacy under new conditions. Years after their own projections have failed to be realised, attributions of failure simultaneously help distance consultants from past optimism and present consultants, in general, as bearers of 'value'. Abdication by one consultant or consultancy firm opens the door for others to go to work. After all, in a competitive industry, such consultants are not hard to come by. After I left the zone, a new team of consultants was indeed appointed to devise a new strategy.

Conclusion

Consultants are instrumental in helping reproduce the SEZ's plausibility on a continuous basis. Consultant outputs – reports, models, PowerPoint decks, scenario tables – stage an impression of technical mastery and ethical purpose. Government officials relied on this impression when officiating the zone's designation in 2018, and when establishing the zone company to run the SEZ thereafter. Subsequently, company officials repeatedly invoke their projections as evidence that a credible plan and a coherent strategy exist, and to motivate for continued political support and funding from provincial and national government stakeholders. But, as this chapter has demonstrated, consultants' forecasts are not as certain as they might appear. Their forecasts – and the technical calculations and applications of best practices these entail – are shaped by the exigencies of maintaining professional reputations.

This chapter examined both what goes into the making of consultant projections in practice, and how consultants justify these after they do not materialise. It showed that in both instances – during the production of knowledge and its later defence – consultants mediate a particular legitimacy dilemma shaped by the demands and constraints of the development consulting industry. This dilemma demands that they be simultaneously technically certain and client-friendly and pro-developmental. The chapter has explored three genres of performance through which consultants grapple with this dilemma, in the attempt to remain legitimate in ever shifting conditions. In each they adjust their displays of emotion, their rhetoric, and their presentations of best practice; and reference different artefacts to substantiate their claims.

Such performances shed light on consultants' simultaneous engagement with possible project 'success', and 'failure', in a context where outcomes are uncertain. They reveal how consultants' assessments of the zone's future are never final but change in accordance with the shifting imperatives of professional self-presentation over time. In this context, consultants' diagnoses of the zone's status are transformed as consultants adapt these diagnoses according to the ever-changing dynamics of green technology markets, their clients' demands, and their own career goals.

The performative genre of 'client sovereignty' deflects blame for previous optimistic forecasts onto commissioning constraints and the TOR. This shifts the basis for evaluating zone outcomes away from consultants' past predictive failures, and onto the policy and political conditions in which they made such predictions in the first place. 'Pragmatic innovation' reframes difficult project terms and problematic client expectations as opportunities for creative workarounds, keeping the idea of zone success plausible in the abstract. 'Technical neutrality', finally, disentangles consultants from political responsibility and project outcomes by

presenting failure as a technical inevitability that nevertheless does not preclude other consultants from working on the project.

Even as individual consultants might be doubtful about the zone's fate, through its circulation in consultancy markets more broadly, the Atlantis SEZ continues to be officially represented as plausible. When one round of forecasts is not realised, and even as meaningful socioeconomic improvement is not delivered, there are new consultants who are willing to work on the project – at least for now.

The remainder of the thesis focusses primarily on those on whom representations of plausible market inclusion ultimately depend. Across the next three chapters, I explore why ordinary Atlantis residents partake in the zone's programmes for community participation, skills, and enterprise development. In each case, I show how, through their involvement, residents not only help sustain the zone company's institutional life, but in doing so also play a part in the production of official representations of its plausible 'success'. The zone is reproduced on the ground even as residents themselves are in two minds about its future outcomes, and as the zone delivers them few opportunities for market participation.

Chapter 4

Community participation as adverse incorporation



Figure 14: Atlantis SEZ Community Engagement (GreenCape, 2019c, p.5)

On a midsummer Saturday morning, I arrive at a local hall in the Atlantis residential area to attend a community stakeholder meeting for the Atlantis SEZ. Today's meeting is a significant occasion, because the Community Stakeholder Network, the group elected to represent all Atlantis residents to the zone company, will present to residents on what they have accomplished in the year prior.

The hall is full, animated with chatter as people register and collect tea and biscuits. By nine o'clock, they take their seats on rows of red plastic chairs. The meeting begins amicably with the hired facilitator calling the participants of the Community Stakeholder Network to the stage. They are dressed for the occasion, signalling professional identities through smart suits and heels. The chairperson of the Network, Henderson, opens the meeting, rubbing his hands together:

The Community Stakeholder Network is endorsed by the community...and that is a fact. It is no joke to serve on this structure. So, you may wonder, what have we done?

He explains how the group had been established almost three years earlier, how they had set up a constitution and founding documents, and how they have engaged in regular meetings with the zone company since. They do all of this, he explains, without pay.

The polite and professional tone of Henderson's address quickly descends into a cacophony of responses from the audience. Standing at the back in a fraying yellow T-shirt, someone shouts:

Tien jaar gelede [ten years ago, in Afrikaans] R500 million came into this community. I'm asking: what have you done? *Ek wil die CSN vra, "Hoe gaan ons benefit met julle as partners?"* [I want to ask the CSN, "How will we benefit with you as partners?"]

The audience cheers. Some people film on their mobile phones. The man in yellow goes on:

What are you going to do to ensure these 500 million will be reflected in the community? We are talking about our people's livelihoods! It's been years. I haven't seen anything as yet.

At the back of the room, the zone company officials text about another 'successful' community stakeholder event, which they later document as evidence of their 'social licence to operate' and of their claim to be readying Atlantis for market inclusion.

This chapter explores the conflict, hinted at in the above vignette, over the terms of the zone company's community participation scheme. Officials frame participation as 'volunteering' in service of the community's market inclusion. But official representations of imminent market opportunities stand in contrast to reality

on the ground. The land allocated for the zone remains empty, as consultants' projections of investment and job creation have yet to materialise. In this context, and with few other opportunities, participants themselves – that is, community representatives – frame their efforts as a form of unpaid work, which some describe as 'exploitation'. Other Atlantis residents, by contrast, often interpret the participants' roles as unfair routes to insider advantage. By exploring each of these contradictory perspectives in turn, this chapter explores how we might critically understand the terms of drawing on the time, energy, emotional investments, and social status of the poor and unemployed, in the name of pending market inclusion, without pay.

Where existing perspectives on market inclusion programmes, and on volunteering for development initiatives more generally, tend to emphasise the benefits accrued to capital (in the form of profits extracted), the state (in the form of subsidised social services), or to volunteers themselves (in the form of marginal livelihoods, status, and belonging), Atlantis offers another lens onto the terms of participation. In this setting, community participation is a highly ambiguous activity. Here, conceptions of benefits and costs are read differently by differently positioned actors. While the participation programme formally rests on the promise that formal economic opportunities will be created, and while volunteers hope their role as participants in the zone will yield personal benefits in the form of remuneration and recognition, none of these imagined benefits are fully realised. As a consequence, participants become the subjects of gossip and public ridicule. Residents blame them for the zone's delays, and for the lack of community-wide beneficiation. Officials call them 'entitled' and deny their requests for payment. Even as participants describe having donated personal resources to fund their involvement, some are called to stand down from their roles.

The community participation programme garners contradictory interpretations among different actors – with differing implications for the status of the SEZ as a ‘success’ or ‘failure’. But ultimately the scheme continues to run. Discredited participants are replaced with new ones. Moreover, participants’ involvement continues to count towards official metrics and narratives of company ‘progress’. Participation is obviously not evidence of actual investment and job creation, like the reports produced by consultants described in the previous chapter, and it is not treated as such. Rather, in the absence of these grander horizons of project ‘success’, participation provides evidence of the ‘social licence to operate’ necessary to substantiate that the right measures are being taken for these horizons to be, at least, plausible.

This chapter therefore argues that this programme promising market inclusion, but not delivering meaningful market connections, depends for its everyday reproduction on new and ambiguous forms of labour. Participants perform moral, affective, and material work through which they seek recognition, belonging, and livelihoods yet incur social and economic risks and costs. While participants are made even more precarious than they were before, the company can claim to be ‘socially responsible’ and ‘ethical’ in the absence of more material outcomes.

In what follows, I trace how participation is variously interpreted by these three sets of actors, before arguing that it is best understood as a distinct form of adverse incorporation that both reproduces the institution and augments participants’ precarity. But first, I bring together a set of perspectives on market inclusion and volunteering to introduce the key analytical stakes for critically examining the terms of participation in this context.

Participation as labour? Amidst chronic unemployment

Un- or underpaid labour has a long history across much of the Global South. Colonial labour recruitment fuelled capitalist development the world over, and in South Africa an extensive process of cheap Black labour recruitment underpinned the expansion of agriculture, mining, and industry (Beinart, 2001; Bolt and Rajak, 2016; Cooper, 2002). But more recently, as explained earlier in this thesis, the economic value of much of the world's poor people has been called into question. Increasing numbers of people are being rendered 'surplus' to the needs of capital at any scale (Ferguson, 2013; Ferguson and Li, 2018; Li, 2013; 2017).

Inclusion schemes of all stripes promise to fix this – but what are the terms of participation for the poor and unemployed? Existing literature on market inclusion calls these terms exploitative, as I elaborate below. But combining this with literature on volunteering, this chapter explores the more ambiguous and multiple valences of participating in schemes promising 'inclusion' but yielding little obvious security or livelihood improvements.

A growing literature on market inclusion schemes, usually focussed on micro-credit and -enterprise schemes in Africa and Asia, examines how, even without conventional labour regimes, the poor can be made into new frontiers of value extraction and accumulation (Dolan and Rajak, 2016b; Elyachar, 2005; Huang, 2017; Kar, 2013; Meagher, 2016; Rajak and Dolan, 2024; Roll, Dolan and Rajak, 2021). Here, in the name of 'empowerment' and 'self-reliance' meant to benefit the poor at the 'bottom of the pyramid', different kinds of labour – including physical, emotional, and social labours – are recruited to support the accumulation of capital for corporations. Meanwhile, the risks and costs of flexible accumulation are outsourced onto the most vulnerable. Julia Elyachar (2005), through an

ethnographic focus on micro-enterprise schemes in Cairo, shows how the cultural practices of the poor are valorised as a form of ‘social capital’ that can be financialised through new forms of credit and debt. This, she argues, amounts to a distinct kind of ‘accumulation by dispossession’, mediated by NGOs (see also Elyachar, 2010; 2012).

Others have drawn on the concept of ‘adverse incorporation’ (Du Toit, 2004; Hickey and du Toit, 2007): ‘inclusion’ in programmes meant to remedy structural ‘exclusion’ and unemployment, in practice augments existing forms of precarity and exploitation (Meagher, 2018; 2020; Meagher and Lindell, 2013; Meagher, Mann and Bolt, 2016; Phillips, 2011). Here, the terms of inclusion are key. It is not just whether people are provided market connections that they did not have before, but what effects such connections have for their livelihoods and security.

Left out of view in this discussion of contemporary market inclusion initiatives is the more ambiguous case of recruitment of the poor and unemployed into schemes wherein there is no discernible capital accumulation. Useful here is a set of anthropological perspectives about volunteering for the ‘public good’, usually facilitated by state or non-profit institutions. But even here, exploitation has remained a key analytic. Writing about volunteering in the Global North, in response to the demise of Fordism and to austerity, Andrea Muehlebach (2011) emphasises how affective yearnings for public recognition (for one’s work), and for belonging, are harnessed by the Italian state. Citizens are encouraged to provide unwaged labour in place of state-provided social services (see also Muehlebach, 2012). It is the ‘newly dispossessed’ she argues, including unemployed youth and pensioners, who bear the burden of providing this labour, as their claims to proper citizenship rest on their performance of useful activity for the national polity. But even as such voluntary

labour resembles a form of exploitation, it is ambiguous in that it supports new forms of social belonging and status. She argues:

Affective labour exists as a curious double. Like wage labour, it is a complex composite of exploitation and salvation, exclusion and utopia, alienation and new forms of sociality (2011, p.76).

In the Global South too, where states are more fiscally strapped than the Global North, poor people have often been recruited to perform unpaid labour to subsidise the delivery of public services and national development more broadly. Africa is a region where this kind of volunteering is clearly in evidence. Scholars have written about volunteering in early post-colonial national development on the continent (such as in Kenya and Tanzania), and, since the 1980s, the rising emphasis on 'civil society' and 'community participation' (Brown and Prince, 2015; Prince and Brown, 2016). In this view, participation offers a means through which the responsibilities of the state can be devolved to individuals and collectives, understood to promote the 'sustainability' of development projects via 'community ownership'. While some argue that new forms of voluntary labour are structurally reminiscent of colonial forced labour regimes (Hunter, 2015; Rossi, 2015), others have observed volunteers' genuine desire to contribute to constructing national futures through public participation (Geissler, 2011; Prince, 2015).

Whether participating in the rollout of social service delivery, peer education, or the consultative participation for 'market inclusion' described in this chapter, voluntary activity in the Global South is arguably particularly ambiguous. That is because the potential benefits accrued personally to volunteers are often greater than in the Global North. In the absence of other opportunities for livelihood, status, and

institutionalised social membership, volunteering opportunities are often highly valued as opportunities for self-making and self-advancement.

Volunteering is often normatively defined by its lack of remuneration: it is the act of doing something for free through which volunteering acquires virtuous status (Mindry, 2001). Yet, in contexts marked by high chronic unemployment, claims about selflessness and altruism often mask pragmatic desires for gains that one might associate with a job (Colvin, 2016). Materially, even the smallest stipend or other resources (like a free meal) are valued benefits. Volunteers can combine such earnings with other forms of income, even from other volunteering positions, to make ends meet. These are even understood in some contexts (and against Western ideals of volunteering as necessarily uncompensated) as entitlements (Wig, 2016).

Volunteering can be a path not just to resources, but also to status and recognition, and potential formal jobs. Through volunteering, poor and unemployed people can gain access to and familiarity with formal institutional worlds like international development and state institutions (Brown and Green, 2015). Through the rise of community participation as a development paradigm, 'community' has become a category through which people without other opportunities can even enact professionalised roles. Through volunteer roles, people can undergo formal capacity building (Phillips and Ilcan, 2004), and acquire the language and don the dress and artefacts (like business cards or email addresses) that are the global signifiers of capable worldly professionals (Green, 2003). Indeed, studies of peer educator volunteers during the early days of the HIV AIDS crisis in South Africa argue that volunteering offered a sense of upward social mobility. While volunteers' roles were premised on egalitarian relations with their 'community', volunteers themselves often hoped to leverage their roles to transcend or leave their communities (James, 2002; McNeill, 2011).

This literature on volunteer participation, focussed on Africa, helps to reveal the more complicated terms of volunteer labour in contexts characterised by poverty and unemployment. Such labour cannot straightforwardly be analysed as ‘exploitation’ or ‘accumulation by dispossession’, in contexts where little capital accumulation occurs, and where participants might themselves benefit from their involvement. But matters are more complicated still. What remains to be drawn out is that, despite hopes for material and social advancement through participation in developmental schemes, such advancement is rarely meaningfully realised. Anticipation of future jobs rarely translates to actual job opportunities (Brown and Green, 2015), and development schemes are often themselves precarious and unreliable, closing down or retrenching staff due to fiscal and donor pressures, among other reasons (Prince, 2014). Prince and Brown (2016, p.9) surmise that ‘the opportunities, trajectories, and institutional forms that connect [volunteers] to [desired] destinations are uncertain, transient and precarious’.

The case of community participation for the Atlantis SEZ helps to illuminate this further. In Atlantis, the SEZ scheme, meant to bring jobs and other market opportunities, has been plagued by long delays and uncertain prospects. While community participants are supposed to represent and champion ‘inclusion’ for their ‘community’, and while they hope to be socially recognised and even paid for this, they are instead blamed for the lack of progress to date. In the absence of promised outcomes, their peers publicly accuse them of being opportunistic, and gossip behind their backs. Officials plot to replace them with others who will be ‘willing to do it for free’. Even the small stipend participants receive for airtime and transport, they claim, is insufficient to fund their own engagement, and their pleas for more formal remuneration are rejected.

Community participation here is an ambiguous activity through which poor and unemployed people strive for belonging and recognition, even as they bear the risks of uncertain market conditions and absorb some of the costs of a financially constrained project. The participants risk their social status, in that they are blamed for project delays, gossiped about, and asked to step down. They can also be said to financially subsidise the programme, in that they are not paid for their involvement, while officials are. The chapter therefore shows how contemporary market inclusion initiatives, even in sites with few market connections, depend on the emotional investments, social status, and unwaged labour of those they claim to benefit, and even augment their existing precarity.

To develop this perspective, the chapter will now provide three ethnographic accounts wherein community participation is apprehended differently by officials, participants, and other Atlantis residents. The final empirical section draws out the implications of these conflicts for participants themselves, arguing that their formalised participation in the SEZ is a kind of adverse incorporation.

Participation as ‘volunteering’ in service market inclusion

Today, SEZs are expected to be socially responsible and sustainable, addressing past reputations as hubs of exploitation and environmental harm. For the Atlantis SEZ, community participation demonstrates official commitment to such ideals, helping shore up its status as a *green technology* SEZ, abiding by the principles of the international UNIDO and World Bank framework for Eco-Industrial Parks (see Chapter 2). This framework encourages zones to ‘improve social performance by addressing the needs of the community and employees including via community dialogue’ (World Bank, 2021, p.15).

Through its community participation scheme, the zone is officially depicted as having a ‘social licence to operate’; the zone company is officially and unofficially represented as having built up ‘trust’ with Atlantis residents, and the SEZ as having their full buy in and support. This is supposed to be good for ‘the community’ as well as for businesses seeking to meet ESG standards (UNCTAD, 2021).

The company’s community participation scheme is described in these terms in official company reports as well as in policy briefs and international best practice handbooks.⁸⁴ For example, a UNCTAD report cites the Atlantis SEZ as an example of:

How an SEZ can be integrated within a community and benefit its surrounding areas, while being an attractive place for investors (UNCTAD, 2021, p.134).

The company’s ‘social licence to operate’ is promoted heavily in meetings with other government stakeholders. In a board meeting in the company offices – with representatives from the Western Cape government, City of Cape Town, and the DTIC present – the officials emphasised ‘the really excellent work being done’ in this area. Johan said, ‘You will never have a 100 per cent happy community, but they are much happier than they were two years ago.’ At which another official jumped in even more affirmatively: ‘We are rock solid on the community development metrics. We tick all those boxes. This is something that we can really be proud of.’

When I joined the company, the officials laid out the importance of social inclusivity in their eyes. They explained wanting to ensure that the zone did not become an ‘enclave’. An official said:

⁸⁴ As a member of staff, I was asked to co-author and present a paper on the ‘lessons’ from the zone’s community participation programme for a national conference on industrial policy.

We need to integrate with the community, not the other way around. We are the one who built a fence and said, “It’s our land.” We can’t have that. That’s why we like the idea of shared value.

Another official went so far as to say that community participation was the most important part of their wider market inclusion agenda:

If we don’t get the social aspect right, there is really no point in being sustainable or economically successful. The most important target is inclusivity.

When I asked them to explain this, they compared their efforts to ‘social work’, saying, ‘Unhealthy people who are unwell can’t develop. You can’t do economic development before you do social development.’ Here, notwithstanding the pathologising analogy, community engagement is equated to a psycho-social or medical intervention for a marginalised population, by implication an a priori condition for their productive participation in the economy. On another occasion the same official described this kind of ‘social engagement’ as the ‘wishy-washy stuff that’s hard to define but is so crucial’.

The officials took pride in following the 2014 SEZ Act, which requires every SEZ to include a member of ‘civil society’ on its board. But the SEZ leadership went further, establishing a Community Stakeholder Network in 2019, as the official body to facilitate communication between the company and the community. The Network participants are imagined to ‘represent’ their community ‘voluntarily’, taking part in meetings, trainings, and events ‘after work’ (for those who have work) and on the weekends, for only a small stipend for airtime and transport.

In the words of an early brochure, the Network was established to ‘strengthen buy-in, and to help ensure that the community allows the SEZ the social license to operate’ (GreenCape, 2019c, p.3). As ‘a conduit between the SEZ and the community’

(GreenCape, 2019c, p.4), the community representatives are meant to facilitate the two-way flow of information, to extend the communicative reach of the company. Noah, the head of community participation, defined a stakeholder in conversation as:

Someone you can rely on to share information. To interpret your messages correctly and relay them to the community correctly.

Noah explained that his role was to ensure that as many people in Atlantis knew about the zone as possible. He often repeated the refrain: ‘Everyone must know so that everyone can benefit. Even *my ouma moet weet* [my grandmother must know].’⁸⁵ The officials advertised information about community stakeholder meetings and other zone company trainings and events through a range of platforms. When I started my fieldwork, advertising to the community was done via emails sent to the company’s database of stakeholders, but this came to be considered too ‘exclusionary’, so they turned to social media and local newspapers.

⁸⁵ Not being from Atlantis himself, the reference to his grandmother was just a turn of phrase for emphasis.



Figure 15: An example of a newspaper publication for a community engagement (photograph taken by this author)

Throughout my time at the company, the community inclusion scheme was rigorously recorded. Every stakeholder meeting was documented, with attendees signing in with names and national personal identification numbers. The number of events per quarter was tallied and reported. For example, the 2021/22 Annual Report notes that ‘a total of 372 community members were reached in the past financial year’ (Atlantis SEZ Company, 2022, p.42) through community integration processes. As mentioned, these statistics would be reported in meetings with other government departments, Johan reminding those present each time, ‘These are new numbers; that’s why we’re sharing them now.’

Informally in the company, the participation programme was often treated as evidence of ‘a community that is really starting to trust the company’, in the words of the CEO (see Chapter 2). But, despite official and unofficial representations of the relationship between the company and the community, and of the company’s

‘inclusivity’, officials privately acknowledged the limits of this relationship. Noah admitted that even their own community database was artificially inflated:

It’s difficult to figure out who the key stakeholders are in Atlantis, it changes year after year. It’s basically only the people on the mailing list. The ones who openly engage with us. But the database is always a moving target as people change their phone numbers and emails all the time.

Noah recognised that without the Community Stakeholder Network, the zone’s claim to reach the ‘whole community’, and to have a ‘good relationship’ with it, was tenuous. He said, ‘We really do rely on them.’

The Community Stakeholder Network constituted elected representatives, drawn from a cross-section of eight ‘sectors’ in Atlantis, including education, youth, women and persons with disabilities, organised labour, faith-based organisations, business, civic organisations, and traditional councils. Prior to the elections, a list of eligibility criteria was published explaining that candidates needed to come from organisations which had been registered, and had proof of operations (including meeting minutes, photographs, and a ‘letter from the community proving activity in the community’ (GreenCape, 2019b)).⁸⁶

Noah explained the process of setting up the Network in more detail. In 2014 GreenCape had set up an ‘interim committee’ with residents of Atlantis to discuss a constitution for the relationship between community and company, and to decide on the process for elections, which were held in early 2019. In the lead up to the elections, GreenCape staff held information sessions around Atlantis. After the elections, they published a report declaring the election free and fair, even as they

⁸⁶ The list of criteria explicitly excluded individuals and political parties.

explained they were called to repeat the elections for the youth and education sectors, because the nominated persons did not meet the established criteria.

Recruiting established leaders from pre-existing organisations in Atlantis was meant to make the process highly ‘inclusive’ across a broad spectrum of stakeholders. It was also a means to ensure that the elected leaders had recognised leadership credentials and status in the community, and constituencies to report to, to make the body more legitimate. The logic of this kind of participation is that ‘communities’, or at least their various ‘interest groups’, have enough homogeneity to be mapped, and therefore systematically communicated with. In one meeting, an official told the group of participants:

The intention of gathering you round the table is because we are very serious about taking your advice into consideration. And we want to hear from your constituencies.

Noah told me that it was in the early workshops with GreenCape that the principle of voluntarism was decided upon. He explained that community members present during these sessions had insisted that any form of payment would ‘dilute the intentions’ of elected representatives. This resonates with scholarship on voluntarism more generally, which argues that it gains its moral force precisely from its lack of remuneration (Mindry, 2001; Prince and Brown, 2016). Noah explained that behind the principle of voluntarism in this instance was the idea that the representatives should be participating ‘for the good of the community’, not for themselves.

Through these assumptions – about the possibility of ‘representing community interests’, and about voluntarism – participants in the Network are seen to contribute to the SEZ’s ‘social licence to operate’. In the absence of meaningful market opportunities being created, this ‘licence’ stands as evidence of the company’s

‘inclusivity’ and of the ‘progress’ officials have made to ready the population for imminent market inclusion. However, the following sections reveal that the terms of participation are more ambiguous when viewed from other perspectives. The next section explores the views of participants themselves, in which they cast the terms of their incorporation into the programme as ‘exploitative’.

Participation as ‘exploitation’

Most of the elected participants were nominated to the Community Stakeholder Network as well-known and respected residents of Atlantis. They were largely in their forties and fifties, having either been born in Atlantis, or having migrated to Witsand, in search of work in the industrial section of the town. Many shared stories of previous factory jobs, being laid off, leaving to find work elsewhere, and returning ‘out of love’ for their community, to care for family, or to start small businesses. They joined civic and activist groups or business forums, ‘to keep busy’, as one participant put it, or because they wanted to be ‘change makers in the community’, as many others had it. Some worked (doing the books for a tavern; as administrators for a labour union; as a nurse at a hospital), but many did not have waged jobs.

When I asked how they got involved with the zone, most of the participants said that they had heard about it through friends or at the December 2018 event when President Ramaphosa formally opened the zone. One person described this as ‘a massive fanfare of two, three, four hundred people, with massive marquee tents’. Others had been involved with GreenCape in the interim committee or had found out about the zone in information sessions in the lead up to the elections in 2019.



Figure 16: CSN elections 2019 (GreenCape, 2019c, p.4)

Once established, the Community Stakeholder Network met regularly with officials, in formal meetings in the office, often having engaged with pre-circulated agendas and having commented on minutes of previous meetings via email. In these meetings, officials reported on zone progress, and the participants would ask critical questions and give endorsements. All in attendance dressed smartly, and they followed strict meeting protocol – raising hands for a ‘point of information’ or to make or second ‘motions’.

They were also asked to act as the ‘face of the community’ during public events like skills graduations (hosted by the company after skills trainings were completed), or government and investor gatherings, and occasionally asked to give speeches to show the ‘community’s support’. In one public meeting, apparently confirming the company’s own representation of the participation programme, the chairperson of the Community Stakeholder Network said of their alliance with the company:

We, as the CSN and community of Atlantis, pledge to work together with you to make sure that this project is a success and that it will become a game changer in Atlantis.

At first, I viewed the participants' constant presence in the office, and their lively engagement in meetings and at events, as evidence of their enthusiasm as volunteers, hopeful about pending market inclusion. But over time, as I talked more intimately with participants, other motivations became apparent. Many saw their involvement as valuable 'work' and hoped to be recognised and paid by the zone company for their contributions.

In my first conversation with a member of the Network, they described their participation to me as follows:

When the ASEZ was born it was made very important that there must be community participation. Since the launch of the ASEZ, the community has been playing a pivotal role as to where we have come today.

On another occasion, when we were sitting around an office table having a meeting, the participants had the opportunity to explain 'what they brought to the table'. Someone said, revealing the moral and affective stakes of their role from their point of view:

We are not representing ourselves; we are representing the community. I have the heartbeat of the community, their concerns. Especially about unemployment.

Another charismatic representative, looking around the table and winking at people as he named them, echoed this sentiment:

We have so much skills [sic], talent, and experience around this table. You know, I want to be part of this, this journey of the SEZ. It is actually heartwarming and inspiring and I say, "You know what, I wanna be part of that to actually make it last." We've got to look out for that legacy now: what will my child experience that we can leave behind. I want to make it easier for people to start a business or get a job. And

we need to make a plan for skills development. In Atlantis ninety percent of the labourers don't have skills. We don't have enough skilled people.

The community participants cast themselves in highly emotive and moral terms as caring and responsible for future generations, and as instrumental in helping to promote future market inclusion. At the same time, they described themselves as differentiated from the rest of 'the community' because they had privileged knowledge and skills. Indeed, as one representative said:

So that is the reason we are on the CSN now, we know how to work with the community. You don't just take someone off the street for fun to work on the CSN.

The participants told me about the capacity-building they had undergone in their roles. They had attended workshops on topics like minute-writing, professional communication, public procurement, infrastructure, and thematic issues like the green economy and net zero. These workshops aimed to equip the participants with a substantive understanding of how the zone company worked. Through these, they acquired the language and knowledge associated with formal government procedure and they often invoked official policy idioms like 'economic transformation' and 'empowerment', linked to skills and enterprise development. They were also equipped with proper meeting etiquette, and participants sometimes even policed officials' decorum, which they complained was 'improper protocol'. On more than one occasion, the zone company facilitators insisted, 'Do you want me to lead these meetings or not?' One participant told me that, as she had dropped out of school, and was 'without an education', it was 'amazing' that she now had 'the level of experience and knowledge to be giving advice to people with master's degrees'. More generally, participants depicted themselves as capable and professional, and depicted their activities as a form of work.

On days without meetings or events, some participants joined at the company offices, using a workspace with computers set aside for them. This fostered a sense of having important roles and work to do. Kayleen exemplified this. In her mid-forties with three daughters, she was elected as a representative to the zone through her involvement in the Khoisan Revival Movement. She had a growing constituency in Atlantis, organised cultural celebrations, and travelled around the province supporting 'indigenous rights'.⁸⁷ Unemployed, but involved in activism and with the SEZ, Kayleen was in the office almost every day. When I asked her what she was doing there, she answered, with an email inbox open on the screen in front of her, 'I have always been a very proactive person. You do not need permission to do the right thing.' She was working across multiple tabs at once, submitting comments on official documents, replying to emails, and reading news articles. As the secretary of the Community Stakeholder Network, she felt responsible for being up to date on all matters related to the zone, and for attending public events.⁸⁸

The participants cast their activities as a form of work worthy of recognition and remuneration. Kayleen told me she had been upset when, in her view, the zone company introduced voluntarism as a principle. She explained that, from her perspective, when the Network was originally set up under GreenCape, it was understood that it would be an officially recognised and resourced body. She claimed that this changed under the stewardship of the zone company:

It was actually very shocking. We contested that in meetings. Why are you now introducing this voluntary thing? So, I feel there was a major... I don't

⁸⁷ The question of 'indigeneity' is highly contested in South Africa. The Khoisan Revival Movement has been cast as emancipatory activism against 'cultural genocide' by some and criticised as the opportunistic work of 'identity entrepreneurs' by others (Bredekamp, 2001).

⁸⁸ More recently, sometime after I had finished my fieldwork, she asked me to write her an official letter with university insignia, recognising and highlighting her contributions to the zone from my perspective. While I informed her of the limited official relevance of my perspective as an independent researcher, I wrote a letter anyway.

know...deviation I would say, from the original intent. And I feel that... it seems like... for me I expected we would be compensated and resourced amply. But that is not the case because we are now considered “volunteers”.

In informal conversations, other participants suggested that ‘the ethos’ associated with the Community Stakeholder Network had changed when the zone company took over. A participant complained that the Network had become a ‘mere post box or rubber stamp’, whose voices were not taken as seriously.⁸⁹

When Kayleen had signed the constitution for the Network, she had scribbled in the margins ‘with reservations as stipulated in email dated 26 January 2021’. I never saw the email, but when I asked her about it later, she said:

Oh, it’s the compensation story. Apparently it was promised but there is none of that... How can a person who doesn’t work, who doesn’t have an income, be taking their bread money?!

Kayleen reckoned that as she spent countless hours travelling to and from meetings, working in the office, and attending public events on behalf the SEZ, she deserved payment. But, more than this, given she did not have another job or source of income, she felt the terms of her involvement were even more unfair as she also had to contribute her own ‘bread money’ to fund her participation. She explained that even the process of attending meetings and appearing in the appropriate dress demanded resources that she lacked. As a single mother, she had to divert money meant for her three daughters’ needs – hospital fees and food, for example – to fund her zone work. She exclaimed:

⁸⁹ To clarify, the participants were not misled. When the Community Stakeholder Network was set up by GreenCape, the decision was taken that participation in the Network should be on a voluntary basis. I surmise that Kayleen, and others’, feelings that the terms had changed derived more from a change in the way company officials talked about the Network, and their constant emphasis on voluntarism, than a substantive constitutional change. Moreover, even as some complained about their voices being treated as a ‘rubber stamp’ under the company, others suggested that, by contrast, the company had been able to ‘restore the community’s trust’, where they felt GreenCape had failed.

I would literally take my own money to get to meetings and hope I come back. It came with a lot of sacrifice! Because you don't get income! And now you can't even go to the doctor because you don't have an income. And I need to make an appearance, but I don't even have enough... Obviously you want to be well groomed and look your best, but you can't do it with nothing.

She described the terms of this participation scheme as a 'sacrifice'. Another member of the Network complained to me that he could barely afford his medical bills to deal with a chronic illness yet spent his time 'volunteering'. Someone else explained that they had developed a physical injury from walking to and from meetings. They said, 'My leg is so sore!', before adding reproachfully:

I'm not complaining, but I think I've sprained it because I walk *everywhere*. You understand what I'm saying. So, it's a sacrificial task. But I don't regret it to see the capacity I've gained.

Participants' views of volunteering – labouring for free, and having their own income put towards company processes – bear resemblances to more established concepts of exploitation or even expropriation (Fraser, 2016; 2022). In Kayleen's view, participation not only extracted value from her labour without fairly compensating for it (exploitation) but also expropriated the 'bread money' and time needed for the social reproduction of her family (expropriation). Indeed, one of the participants related their experiences to the concept of labour exploitation more explicitly:

This is part of history of exploitation by government institutions and private companies that used Atlantis human resources. Earlier and still now...

This interlocuter was drawing a link between traditional labour exploitation in factories and contemporary efforts to establish inclusion in Atlantis. In this view, the zone's inclusion scheme, while yet to create typical labour arrangements as

envisioned in policy, was nonetheless drawing on Atlantis 'human resources' without fair pay.

This resonates with scholarly perspectives on market inclusion cited earlier, which treat programmes as novel forms of labour exploitation (for example Huang, 2017; Meagher, Mann and Bolt, 2016). But in this instance, while the participants had their own reasons for wanting to cast their activity as labour exploitation, and while the concept was meaningful to them in vernacular and affective terms, its application has analytical limits. For one, no capital was accumulated from participants' efforts.

From other vantage points, neither officials nor other residents in Atlantis saw participants' involvement as a form of work, or as worthy of remuneration. Instead, in this context of chronic unemployment, many Atlantis residents saw participation as a form of unfair personal advantage, yielding little benefit for others.

Participation as 'unfair advantage'

Many Atlantis residents viewed the community participation programme as an opportunity for self-advancement in a context where people experience not inclusion but economic abandonment, and abjection (feeling left behind by anticipated trajectories of 'modern' life) (Ferguson, 1999). Volunteering, from their perspective, was as a privileged vehicle to secure insider status and access to imagined benefits at the expense of marginalised outsiders. This evoked envy and resentment. Others have written about envy, and even potential violence, that emerges from contestations over political incorporation in post-apartheid South Africa (Dawson, 2014; von Holdt, 2013). Here, many are excluded from avenues of economic inclusion, and so pursue political incorporation instead. Or else they imagine that

others (particularly those perceived to have some kind of ‘insider’ status) are profiting from such. While the participation programme itself did not provoke the kinds of overt violence described by von Holdt and others, it became a terrain of struggle over incorporation and beneficiation from public resources. In this setting, participation was imagined as a rare route to incorporation – even if accusations of material benefit of the kinds imagined were only ever grounded in rumour.

The Community Stakeholder Network was a constant source of animated gossip and conversation in social settings. Even those participants who were praised and well-liked by many at first, later attracted criticism – from petty insults about the irritating way they spoke in public, to more substantive accusations that they simply ‘did nothing for the community’.

In one conversation, a resident explained that there had been ‘drama’ when the elections took place: ‘There was a lot of fighting to become part of the CSN because the community believed this was the place to be to get opportunities out of the SEZ.’ Rumours circulated that some participants must have been ‘political appointments’, because they were described as lacking popularity or credentials. I was often told in private conversation about this or that community representative who ‘lied’ about being part of an established organisation, with some even claiming that participants forged documents, or started groups on the eve of the elections for the sake of the opportunity. In one case, when I asked some residents about a representative that the zone company officials often described privately as ‘influential’ in the community, they scoffed. They said this person had ‘no constituency!’ and had even ‘hijacked’ an existing organisation, just to ‘get a seat at the table’.

Others claimed that the participants lacked the basic professionalism to do the job properly. A resident involved in early Community Stakeholder Network

workshops, before the elections, said those who later became participants lacked the skillset to engage government and were more focused on personal gain than community welfare:

They would only focus on these petty little things instead of the bigger picture. Those meetings were very painful. It was all about having a seat, and positions, and being seen to be involved in this big thing that is going to drive the future of Atlantis *blahblahblah*. So, *ja*, it became a very painful conversation often to have government officials with a very specific agenda and mandate interact with people who doesn't [sic] have a clue.

This private gossip was also expressed in public stakeholder meetings, which became regular sites of intense confrontation. Members of the audience would heckle and shout down participants' responses. In these meetings, discussion invariably revolved around project resources and their distribution. Residents often asked for a breakdown of programme spending or else claimed that official reports (where project finances are officially published) were incorrect. At one meeting, on the back of a series of questions and complaints about where the budget for the zone had gone, someone said:

Everyone wants that money except people that really need it. It's not supposed to be like that. Those millions – it's the poorest of the poor's tax! And what do they get back? Nothing!

This implies that those involved in the project (officials and participants) had taken the public funds for themselves in an unjust manner, depriving the poor of their entitlements.⁹⁰ In the rare instances that company officials stood up to declare what

⁹⁰ This, to my knowledge, was not the case, as the zone company officials were fastidious about getting a 'clean audit'. Company officials described residents' complaints about missing funds as 'township exaggeration at its very worst'. In the example cited in the introduction, when residents discussed

the budget for a certain programme was, this was often ignored, as rumour and outrage seemed to carry greater persuasive force.⁹¹ Such rumours emerged from a feeling that, despite the various programmes the company was running, there was little substantive benefit in the community in terms of jobs or other opportunities. A resident who had attended most of the public meetings, and who worked in a local creche but still struggled to make ends meet, explained:

There was an announcement that monies were made available. For what it was, I don't know for what it was. But that is money that people want. So, *ja*, there is this perception that there was a pool of money and the money is no longer there.

Some residents were more forgiving about the distribution of funds than others.

Another resident said:

What the people don't understand, from where I sit and see it, people have done a lot of work. Maybe not all the work was of benefit to Atlantis, but a lot of work has been done, you see.

Others described this frustration as stemming from the experience of waiting, and in particular, being in a state of doubt about the eventual outcome (see also Auyero, 2011; Dawson, 2014; Janeja and Bandak, 2018; Jeffrey, 2010). Someone told me that when the President launched the zone in 2018 'people were very excited, happy, they thought they would get the jobs; within a year everyone would be working'. He laughed cynically, before continuing:

We didn't know that it was gonna take time. Now everyone is sitting at home waiting. We don't know if it is going to come, if we are going to get [jobs]. Everyone is

R500 million that supposedly went missing, an official said privately later, 'There is no such nonsense! With that money we could buy twenty times the land we have.'

⁹¹ Officials were usually silent during meetings, meaning that participants were blamed for 'their ignorance' or else 'self-interest'.

confused. We are confused about if it is gonna happen, when and how! You see. We want to see things going!

I asked him if people forgot about, or gave up on the idea of the zone after all this time, to which he exclaimed:

No! They didn't forget about it. They always ask about it. "When is it going to roll out now?" They are waiting for new factories; they are waiting for new jobs. Investors coming from overseas! They are still waiting.

For almost everyone I spoke to in Atlantis, though, the central question was who was really benefitting from the programme (and the zone more broadly), given the process had been going on for years without promised results materialising. Residents acknowledged that it was officials who earned money, and who ultimately made decisions about how to allocate project funds. I often heard people describe the SEZ, and its community participation programme, as 'a scapegoat for somebody else to make money'. Rolette, unemployed but active in local politics and civic organisations, aired her concerns to me. In her view, the people who seemed to be benefiting were the people in 'managerial and senior positions'. She located the reason for this among Atlantis residents themselves. She said:

I hope and pray this SEZ is going to really happen because for me as a community member you look at all these millions and billions that they talk about, is it really for us as a community?! Every time it's somebody else coming from somewhere controlling the money *meant for the people of Atlantis!* You understand? But because I want a position for myself, I'm dragging you down, putting myself forward.

Rolette, like many others, said she 'hoped and prayed' for the market inclusion that the zone was promised to yield but was unsure about whether these aspirations would be realised in part because of the in-fighting in Atlantis, and the self-

promoting actions of the participants. The participants were often cast by residents not as virtuous volunteers, but as amoral characters sabotaging collective beneficiation.

In addition to the horizon of market inclusion, residents viewed participation with a backward-looking temporal horizon, focusing on delays, and a longer history of failed state intervention in the region. In all, hope and conviction about future market opportunities were expressed interchangeably with scepticism. Overall, their fluctuating views on the SEZ reflect the work of doubt – about whether to believe in future job creation, and whether to trust claims about desired community inclusion and beneficiation against a longer backdrop of failed promises. Sitting with Rolette one day at a local fast-food chain, watching some teenagers milling about the mall, she mused, ‘We are coming from apartheid where incentives and plans collapse.’ Implied here was the longer history of state promises of job creation, under apartheid, via the industrial decentralisation programme and Coloured Labour Preference Area (see Chapter 1). Rolette elaborated the implications for her view of the contemporary SEZ, just moments after expressing hope about its success:

Today, as much as they want to claim that they bring stuff to the benefit of Atlantis, we as a community will never trust them again. I am talking about anyone that comes here whether it's this [SEZ] company or any company that wants to put up a production plant. We are too wise for them now.

This collective doubt – not only about whether the programme will succeed (or not), but about whom to trust in the meantime – gains further stakes against a broader backdrop. Many Coloured Atlantis residents view themselves as systematically and perpetually marginalised. Someone explained, ‘Atlantis people

suffer trauma, rejection, from apartheid until now.’ Indeed, a common word used to describe the people of Atlantis in Afrikaans was *‘weeskind’* meaning ‘orphan’.

Though BEE, a major legal framework aiming to rectify apartheid racial inequality, targets Coloured and African people equally, many in Atlantis claim that in practice Coloured people are not the state priority (Adhikari 2009; Pirtle 2020, 2023). I participated in several conversations where people imagined how the public sector allocates opportunities. Someone said that if you have a ‘Coloured-sounding surname’ – or a White one, they said, looking at me – ‘now you’re at the bottom of the pile. They put your CV in the bin.’

‘Coloured’ as a racial category enforced during apartheid, persists in law, and in popular discourse, even as scholars, activists, and persons classified or identifying as ‘Coloured’ debate its relevance under espoused principles of democratic ‘non-racialism’ (Seekings, 2008b). While some eschew the category as an apartheid construct, invented for the purposes of ‘divide and rule’, others embrace it as a meaningful index of identity, culture, and shared history (Adhikari, 2005; 2009a; Doms and Chutel, 2023). Recent studies of coloured self-identifications highlight how many Coloured people continue to feel a sense of ambiguity or shame around their racial identity and express a persistent sense of marginalisation within the democratic nation, where many feel they are now ‘not Black enough’, as was clearly the case among many in Atlantis (Adhikari, 2004; Erasmus, 2001; Wicomb, 1998).

But the perception that the Atlantis SEZ was somehow structurally rigged to exclude them by those in power was expressed by African residents as well. A Witsand resident described the SEZ to me as ‘smoke and mirrors’, and in the same stroke, as ‘a clown putting on makeup in the circus – when the show is over, they wash off the makeup’. This rather tragic metaphor depicts the zone as an

orchestrated façade, and those in official positions (including participants) as potentially even malicious con-artists.

In such a context, community participation is cast not as part and parcel of incoming market inclusion, nor as labour exploitation. Instead, participation is depicted as a rare and unfair opportunity for personal gain and self-advancement, in the name, but at the expense of, a poor population suffering from interlocking forms of exclusion.

But to treat community participation in this way still does not capture the full picture. To my knowledge, and as already explained, the participants did not receive substantive financial gain through their roles beyond small stipends for airtime and transport costs and they felt they even had to contribute their own resources. Moreover, their relationships and reputation with officials and the wider population were adversely affected through their involvement in the programme, as I will now further demonstrate.

Participation as adverse incorporation of another kind

In this context of a scheme promising market inclusion, and community wide beneficiation, but with uncertain prospects of delivering these, participation is clearly highly ambiguous when viewed from different perspectives. However, in this setting, it was not the ambiguous terms of participation that were called into question, nor the underlying uncertainties of market inclusion more generally. Rather it was participants' motivations that were framed as morally ambiguous, or downright immoral. Participants became the subject of gossip and public ridicule among residents and officials. Many were asked to step down from their roles; to be replaced by others. Moreover, pleas for proper remuneration were never met, argued against

on both moral and fiscal grounds, as I will show. Therefore, participants can be said to absorb the reputational risks, and subsidise the financial costs, of this programme promising inclusion, but not yet delivering it. Through these mechanisms, even in a context with few market connections and chronic uncertainty, participants play a role in reproducing the institution, both its financial arrangements and its official representations as a plausible agent of market inclusion.

Let us return to the community stakeholder meeting from the introduction. Both zone company officials and residents had been informally referring to this meeting in the days prior as a ‘reflection AGM [Annual General Meeting]’, to think about ‘what went wrong’ with the participants. During the meeting itself, it was the participants, rather than the zone company, who were blamed for the lack of collective beneficitation from the zone and from the resources allocated for it. Residents called for the participants as individuals, rather than the SEZ company or the community participation structure per se, to be replaced. A local critic spoke out, receiving applause:

We need to ask: Is the CSN still relevant today? They are not helping us, not talking to us, not fighting for us. There is no fighting spirit... We can't let them leave us only the crumbs. They [the institution] got so much money... and they benefit from that money to sustain themselves and not develop our society... and now we are sitting here fighting among ourselves. If you are on the CSN and not doing your job, step down because you're wasting valuable time.

The participants were blamed for not ‘doing [their] job’ of ensuring community beneficitation from SEZ resources. In this meeting, the participants tried to defend themselves, reiterating their commitments to public service by saying things like, ‘We do understand that livelihoods are at stake. We want to serve.’ But they were shut down with the refrain, ‘Don't defend the CSN. The community elected you and you

must listen.’ Eventually, it was decided that the group would not be totally overhauled but rather given another chance; to be ‘realigned’ to become more accountable to the community.

This staunch criticism of participants stands in contrast to their earlier credibility among their peers. I often heard people comment on how Henderson, the chairperson, had been a ‘very well-respected leader in our community’. I also witnessed a member of the Network, who had been publicly applauded by residents when she had joined the group (to replace someone else), later pressured to step down – so severe was the criticism to which she was subjected. But here again, residents asked for a replacement, not the disbandment of the entire structure.

Meanwhile, on the office WhatsApp group, officials acknowledged that it was ‘very understandable that the community is frustrated. They have been promised so much for so long’. But, instead of reckoning with these conflicts as symptomatic of the uncertainties of market inclusion, due to changing renewable energy market conditions, among other reasons, like other residents, the officials chalked up their lack of legitimacy to their poor moral character. Debriefing after an event, in a conversation about how ‘amazing’ and ‘groundbreaking’ the participatory approach was, an official turned to me and insisted the participants were ‘not that morally clear cut’. She exclaimed, ‘It’s not all altruistic. It’s often “What’s in it for me? How can I make money?”’ As she understood it:

At the end of the day, it translates to who takes credit for roles and responsibilities. If you are cited in any public media, you can lay claim to funding. It’s like, “I want money because I’ve had success with this.”

Officials talked privately about how problematic requests for payment were. They cast such requests as an aberration from the ethic of volunteering for their

community (meant to be selfless). More than this, they did not agree that what participants did counted as a valid form of work that might be deserving of remuneration. A colleague described the participants in an Afrikaans word, '*bakhand*', which, when I asked for clarification, she illustrated by cupping her hands, a gesture associated with begging (getting money as a form of charity without having earned it). This paints participants in pejorative normative terms as undeservingly entitled.

Requests for remuneration were systematically denied. Noah told me that 'Whenever [payment] comes up in conversation, I will shut it down immediately.' He said fiercely:

The CSN has no legal standing. It's not a company, not a community trust, association, non-profit. The CSN is a *voluntary* community organisation!

The general idea, reiterated in staff meetings, was that:

There are people who are willing to cooperate and share knowledge for free. If we get the correct people to advise, they won't need compensation.

Among both residents and officials then, participants were treated with derision, and denied both the recognition and remuneration that they sought.

This threat to their social status was acutely perceived by participants themselves. Henderson complained to me:

People say I am looking after myself with the SEZ. I don't even have my own vehicle! The SEZ doesn't pay me for what I am doing. People are looking for my head to roll. They think I am involved for my health, instead of for them.

He characterised this in ethical-religious terminology as a crucifixion:

As you say in Afrikaans, *ons het die bluf van die ASEZ company* [we bear the brunt of the ASEZ company]. It means I have to answer questions that are the ambit of the company! Myself and [the CEO] did say that until such time when nothing is going to happen, we [the CSN] are going to be crucified. And that's exactly so, we are taking the brunt because nothing has happened yet.

Another member of the Network said to me that he understood that their status hinged on 'having something concrete to take out to our community in terms of job creation'. He said, in his opinion, this was part and parcel of their leadership role:

There are people who are throwing us with stones [sic] in meetings. But once you are sitting in the car on the driving side, you must expect the dogs are going to bark outside.

Whether talking about physical injuries, sacrifice, or being metaphorically pelted with stones, participants understood their roles to come with costs – to themselves, and to their families – in terms of personal and family resources expended, lost social standing, and lost time and energy that could be spent earning an income.

While this is not labour exploitation of the kind that some participants themselves want recognised – in that there is no accumulation derived from extracting value – it is a distinct kind of adverse incorporation. The terms on which participants are incorporated into this market inclusion scheme render them more precarious than they were before. This is because they gain little materially – and even donate personal resources – and risk losing social status with officials and among other residents, among whom they were once esteemed.

This said, despite the lack of direct capital accumulation, the refusal to pay participants cannot be totally separated from financial questions. Officials' arguments about the participants' (lack of) moral credentials slipped seamlessly into arguments about the financial sustainability, and indeed audit compliance, of the

company. Noah repeatedly told claimants that their requests for payment not only went against the Network's constitution, but they also could not be accommodated within any company 'KPIs' and their ring-fenced finances. In Board meetings, which included members of the Western Cape government (that covers the zone's operational costs and staff salaries), officials warned of 'a financial risk in paying participants'. A provincial board member said:

We run into really dangerous territory when we create the expectation that the ASEZ will pay people when we know there is no money for it.

The participation programme thus relies on unpaid activity justified both on moral grounds – that payment would corrupt volunteers' altruism– and on fiscal grounds – that it is unaffordable.

Yet appeals to affordability obscure the politics of fiscal prioritisation: whose labour counts as worth paying for, and whose does not. The salaried professionals employed by the company, whose own livelihoods depend on this allocation, ultimately benefit from this arrangement.⁹² Noah said to me once that in an 'ideal world' his own job (as facilitator of community integration) should go to a local person, given the company's commitments to job creation in the area. But, he explained, this was impossible. He justified his own position on the grounds that he, unlike residents, was 'neutral and transparent', without 'something personal to gain'. He said:

My role should go to a community member but none of the community want one of them because they are so politically divided. They say the community representative would bring too much "baggage"; that they would always have something personal to gain. Versus me. I am completely neutral and transparent.

⁹² Over R17 million went to employee-related costs in 2022 (Atlantis SEZ Company, 2023, p.92). This included the fee (albeit minimal) that I was paid as a Research and Technical Advisor.

Noah's reasoning here reveals how claims to neutrality and professionalism – qualities that justify officials' remuneration – are defined precisely against the presumed partiality of residents. While the participation programme formally rests on ideas about (a degree of) community homogeneity and individual altruism, here it is the informal recognition of internal division and inevitable self-interest that becomes the rationale for paying officials but not community 'volunteers'. Noah's framing of neutrality thus justifies distributive choices: it excludes community claims to be paid while preserving officials' professional incomes.

Despite not being valued, participants' time, effort, resources, and social status, are nonetheless crucial to reproducing the zone company. These contributions effectively subsidise officials' salaries, and enable officials to continue to represent the company, and the SEZ, as 'inclusive'. Beyond these costs, the reputational risks of the programme's inherent uncertainties are also offloaded onto participants. In this way, even in a setting with few market connections, the terms of participants' incorporation into a market inclusion scheme are adverse.

Conclusion

This chapter examined the Atlantis SEZ's community participation programme ethnographically. It explored how the programme is institutionally sustained despite underlying conflicts over the terms of participant involvement, in a setting where promised outcomes are not delivered and funding is scarce. To do so, the chapter traced how unemployed people are mobilised as 'representatives' in the SEZ's community participation programme – meant to evidence the zone's 'social licence to operate', while in practice being seriously contested.

During my fieldwork, zone company officials were keen to see participation as ‘volunteering’ in the name of market inclusion. They framed the programme as a moral and technical innovation – proof that the SEZ is not a relic of exploitative industrialisation but socially responsible and sustainable. For officials, the participation programme hinged morally on participants’ ability to ‘represent’ their ‘community’ and their willingness to volunteer without pay. Ultimately, participants were discredited for failing on both accounts, having been publicly criticised by residents, and having showcased undesirable forms of entitlement in asking for remuneration.

Participants themselves interpreted the same arrangement very differently. They valued the sense of purpose and professional capacity building that came with representing their community. They regarded their efforts as a form of work – time-consuming, necessary, and deserving of remuneration. But participation entails hidden risks and costs: incurred not just from the absence of pay but from the loss of social standing in the community, and even the financial costs they incur (taken from their family’s ‘bread money’) to travel to meetings and dress their best. Many saw participation as a continuation of Atlantis’s longer history of labour exploitation, wherein their energy and commitment are once again harnessed without fair compensation.

Residents in Atlantis offered a third perspective, casting participation as a rare but morally fraught opportunity for personal advancement. In a marginalised setting where steady work and political recognition are scarce, any proximity to institutions like the SEZ is perceived as a privilege. Rumours and gossip about participants circulated through the town, reflecting both envy and scepticism: if the SEZ had yet to deliver jobs, those visibly involved must somehow be benefiting. These suspicions reveal how, amidst cross-cutting marginalisations, participation itself can become an

imagined index of access to power and resources, and of anxiety about who will actually benefit from the SEZ's available funds.

Taken together, these contrasting framings reveal participation to be a profoundly ambiguous activity, with different moral and material stakes when viewed from different positions. Yet, despite and even through these conflicts, the community participation scheme continues to run, people continue to take part, and reams of evidence of a 'social licence to operate' are documented and published. In the absence of promised market opportunities, this 'licence' underpins official claims about the company's 'success' at preparing the population for imminent market inclusion. The unpaid efforts of participants themselves are central here. They sustain company representations of inclusivity at no additional cost to the company itself; in this way serving as a financial subsidy for an institution under budgetary constraints.

Building on debates about market inclusion as adverse incorporation, and the anthropology of volunteering, this chapter has argued that market inclusion schemes in places with few market connections depend for their reproduction on new kinds of precarious labour. The time, energy, status, and work of poor and unemployed participants are drawn on, yet they receive no substantive remuneration and even incur social and economic losses. They are made more precarious than they were before. In this way, the terms of participants' involvement in the scheme are adverse.

The community participation scheme is but one of three programmes the zone company runs as part of its claim to prepare the unemployed for market inclusion. In the next chapter, I explore the skills development programme – meant to prepare a skilled labour force according to existing market demand. I examine how the scheme is understood and reproduced by different actors as it features in their own projects, amidst prevailing unemployment.

Chapter 5

Skills development in the absence of jobs: A moral economy of recognition, responsibility, and care



Figure 17: A graduation ceremony (Atlantis SEZ Company, 2021)

The office is buzzing with excitement and preparation. Company officials are rushing decorations into the largest room: laid over the blue nylon carpets is a green astroturf stage, and behind that a large white screen printed with a black graduation cap and curly green font, saying ‘Congratulations!’. Luminescent green, branded goody bags are laid out on the plastic chairs and a wooden desk, dragged to one side, is covered in printed certificates.

Today we will celebrate twelve candidates having completed a fifty-day, accredited course in mechanical fitting. Besides the graduands themselves, we are expecting their families, guests from the Community Stakeholder Network, and officials from the City of Cape Town. Lucinda, one of the skills development officials, has been preparing for this graduation ceremony for some time. She is in her best

attire, wearing leather trousers and boots, her black hair tied back into a high ponytail. When I compliment her outfit, and the effort going into preparing the room, she replies, smiling, ‘I know. I want the graduates to feel special, so they enjoy getting more skills and education and see the importance of it.’

The graduands filter in, adorned in suits, high heels, and black gowns and hats rented by the company for the occasion. To open the event, Lucinda announces:

We are here to celebrate you! We are happy and eager to further assist in the upliftment of the community through skills development, so you can elevate yourselves to the next level! Our mandate is to deliver accredited skills development and training courses.

She explains that the provided course is accredited by the Quality Control Council for Trades and Occupations (QCTO) and the Manufacturing, Engineering and Related Services Sector Education and Training Authority (MERSETA), meaning that it will, in theory, be universally recognised by employers. She painstakingly reads out the unit standards for the various skills acquired in the course, as evidence of their standardised and certified quality: for safety, drawing, measuring, identification of materials in the workplace, and use of hand tools, power tools, and drilling tools.⁹³

Before handing out the certificates, Lucinda concludes:

You are now more marketable, more employable in the green sector. The expectation from you and us is that you will be the best possible version of yourself; that you reach self-reliance and financial independence! Pat yourselves on the back.

The room claps. Three young women go up in their black robes to take pictures together. A company official hands them a branded frame saying ‘#graduated’ to take pictures for social media.

⁹³ Unit standards are standardised numerical codes of learning outcomes, as specified by the National Qualifications Framework.

The zone company officially claims that its ‘demand-led’ skills programme equips people with the certified skills needed by green technology markets. Skills development is described in official company reports and presentations as a vehicle for upward mobility for programme participants; as a value proposition for future investors (in the form of a ready, skilled labour force); and as a potential source of economic competitiveness and growth for the Western Cape economy. This echoes a wider policy discourse, in South Africa and internationally, wherein skills development is expected to catalyse personal and also macroeconomic transformations (Adely et al., 2021; Allais, 2012b).

But, contrary to definitions of skills development as the planning and inculcation of new capacities that can be improved, bought, and sold, like commodities (Allais, 2022), critical scholars argue that skill in practice cannot be separated from processes of recognition and valuation in social, political, and historical context (Brown and De Neve, 2024; Carswell and De Neve, 2018). In practice, skills – and skills development – do not always equate to new and better livelihood prospects. New skills are not always recognised or valued, or else trap workers in forms of low-paid, precarious work. A cognate strand of critical scholarship shows that the primary function of skills development under conditions of flexible accumulation is not so much to produce technical capabilities as to inculcate self-enterprising, self-improving, and disciplined dispositions in workers. It is these dispositions, rather than learned capabilities, that are said to be important to employers as they render workers more governable and exploitable within contemporary labour markets (Datta, 2024; Nambiar, 2013; Ruthven et al., 2016; Upadhyaya and RoyChowdhury, 2024).

Notwithstanding their insights for labour scarce contexts, where workers are needed, such perspectives provide only limited insight into skills development in a

setting like Atlantis, characterised less by labour exploitation than chronic unemployment. Here, skills trainings might prepare people for jobs (both by inculcating new capabilities and new dispositions), but these jobs are in fact few and far between. This was clear to me on the day of the mechanical fitting graduation. Sitting in the audience together with some Atlantis residents, an elderly man turned in his chair to face me, murmuring solemnly:

It's just sad you know, watching these young people look so excited about their futures. I wonder how many of them will actually get a job after this. The SEZ does so many skills programmes, but nobody gets a job.

This chapter explores the making of a 'skilled labour force' according to 'market demand' in a context of mass joblessness. Drawing on perspectives on the social construction of skill, it asks: what meanings, practices, and relationships characterise skills development in a setting where new skills do not automatically equate to valued capabilities, or to waged employment relations?

To answer this question, dynamics of recognition and valuation remain central. But in a setting where skills development is not translating into jobs as planned, it is not only those procuring new skills who seek recognition. Skills development officials themselves seek recognition for their own capabilities as 'specialists' and for the institutional worth of their work. Central to understanding the effects of skills development in this context, therefore, is the work of officials to make skill visible, countable, and credible – through audits, unit standards, accreditation, databases, and public celebrations.

While this sustains official representations of the skills development programme as preparing people for work, sensitivity to context requires expanding the analytical frame further. This chapter argues that the making of 'skill' in Atlantis

extends far beyond the production of recognisable (certified) technical capacity for the labour market. It is an institutionalised process through which both officials and residents constitute themselves as worthy of mutual recognition in the absence of labour market demand. Through this process, they also work out concomitant obligations to provide, and entitlements to receive, piecemeal livelihood assistance – and even forms of ‘care’ – beyond wages.

To develop this argument, the chapter traces the intertwined efforts of skills officials and trainees to prepare both for future market demand and for its absence. It begins by examining how officials orient their work towards generating demonstrable evidence that they are closing a ‘skills gap’, despite manifold bureaucratic, epistemological, and ethical challenges. It then shows how residents respond in kind by showcasing their readiness and commitment to preparing for market demand, presenting themselves as proactive and employable subjects. But the chapter shows that residents pursue training not only to acquire new skills, but rather new certificates and updated CVs that employers might recognise, and, moreover, to secure recognition of their existing ‘intelligence and capacity’ from skills officials themselves.

These mutual struggles for recognition are imbricated. Residents’ expectations that their skills should be acknowledged and valued inform their criticisms of skills development officials; these criticisms, in turn, shape how officials understand their own roles. Officials respond by offering stipends, guidance, and other forms of personal attention and assistance that expand the narrow remit of demand-led training.

Finally, the chapter argues that skills development amidst chronic unemployment becomes the grounds for a particular kind of moral economy. The unemployed press claims for broader forms of assistance from officials – stipends,

food, transport, and other types of help. Officials partially accede to such claims, even if only contingently. Skills development thus becomes not a bridge to labour market preparation, but an institutional setting in which personal worth, institutional responsibility, and entitlement to support are negotiated in work's absence.

The chapter provides another lens onto how a scheme promising employment and market inclusion, yet not delivering these at scale, is nevertheless reproduced in practice. The SEZ is sustained here at the level of official representation through published reports attesting to the creation of a skilled labour force ready for green technology markets. These are not representations of all-out project 'success'. Instead, they underwrite an official claim that policies and plans are being implemented, such that their underpinning logic – that skills development is an ingredient of market inclusion – remains, at least officially, plausible. Meanwhile, its everyday institutional operation is sustained also through ongoing struggles over what is actually available in the ambit of the institution, in the meantime – recognition, 'care', and livelihood assistance. Skills development here entails diverse meanings, practices, and relationships that coalesce around these limited advantages.

To further establish the stakes for this argument, I now expand on a set of critical perspectives that treat skill as socially and politically constructed in context to advance an investigation of skills development amidst chronic unemployment.

Recognising 'skill' in practice: Towards a focus on skills development amidst chronic unemployment

In international and domestic policy discourse a shortage of skills is presented as a primary cause of unemployment, and skilling is presented as a potential solution

(Adely et al., 2021; Allais, 2012b). This is because a lack of skills, or ‘skills gap’, is depicted as the main reason people are unable to secure and succeed at work (Buchanan et al., 2025). South Africa is said to have a ‘skills gap’ because the majority of the labour force here is un- or low-skilled, while the economy itself has shifted towards higher skills sectors like finance and services (Habiyaemye, Habanabakize and Nwosu, 2022; Seekings and Nattrass, 2005; 2015).

The solution to this problem, as laid out in South Africa’s skills frameworks and policies, is to gear the education and training system towards labour market demand, to ensure that the supply of skills will be absorbed into industry. In line with this demand-led agenda, the 1998 Skills Development Act created Sector Education and Training Authorities (SETAs) and skills frameworks to implement skills development in a standardised way. Qualifications are all numerically coded as ‘unit standards’ according to the idea that they can be more easily matched with available market demand (Allais, 2012b; Allais, 2022). The aim is to make skills access more equal and transparent, providing also ‘low skilled’ people with certifications to help them enter the labour market (Allais, 2020).

Critics of this dominant policy discourse point out that ‘skill’ is often defined too narrowly as a fixed commodity that can be produced, bought, and sold – based in turn on the assumption that skill is something to be specified by employers, and produced by educators (Allais, 2022). This narrow definition borrows assumptions from human capital theory and neoclassical economics more generally (Allais, 2012a; Powell and McGrath, 2019).⁹⁴ Writing specifically about vocational education and

⁹⁴ Human capital is defined as the economic value of a person’s ‘skills’, broadly construed. While initially controversial, Chicago School rational choice theorist Gary Becker won a Nobel Prize in Economic Science in 1992 for human capital theory, developed in conversation with education economics scholar T.W. Schultz. They rejected the notion of labour as a homogenous category, arguing that knowledge and skill could increase the capital yields of human labour (Becker, 1964, Schultz, 1971). According to Brown et al. (2020) their ideas descend from a longer liberal economic

training (VET), Powell and McGrath (2019, p.5) argue that this grounding in human capital theory creates the assumption that ‘VET is only worth investing in if it provides a positive rate of return for the economy and to productivity’ and that ‘in this model, VET is entirely instrumental and only narrowly concerned with paid work in the formal sector’.

The narrow definition of skill as a fixed or standard commodity whose worth is determined by (often short-term) market demand (see also Urciuoli, 2008) leaves out of view how ‘skill’, in practice, is socially constructed. Writing about what they call ‘the social life of skill’, Carswell and De Neve (2018, p.312) argue:

What remains...obscured in much policy and social science writing on skill formation are the social relations through which skills are accessed and mobilized, as well as the social and political processes through which skill is valued (or undervalued) and therefore can translate (or fail to translate) into more secure livelihoods and upward mobility.

In other words, a narrow focus on ‘skill’, as a commodity or even, more commonsensically, as a learned ability to complete specific tasks, is partial. In practice, what gets recognised and experienced as ‘skill’ is equally the outcome of social and institutional processes, embedded in historical projects of social distinction, power, and constructions of value (Allais, 2022; Brown and De Neve, 2024). In practice, structural markers of social difference – such as race, gender, class, and immigration status – shape the valuation of skill (Osterman et al., 2022). Skill recognition and valuation are also often filtered through perceptions of other relevant ‘soft skills’ or dispositions, norms, and values (Urciuoli, 2008). Flexibility, self-reliance, and independence, alongside professionalism and English language

tradition, building on John Locke and Adam Smith, who viewed skilled labour as equivalent to other forms of capital, like private property or machines.

skills, for example, become indexical of desired personhood as much as skilled labour (Datta, 2024; McGuire, 2013; Nambiar, 2013; Prentice, 2008; Ray, 2024).

Hence skill does not automatically translate into decent or dignified work (Allais, 2020; Buchanan et al., 2025). Scholars have shown that the acquisition of new skills, meant to produce ‘empowerment’ and upward social mobility, can instead exacerbate forms of poverty and precarity, when trainees from already disadvantaged backgrounds are equipped with low value skills that trap them in precarious labour markets, or when skills go unrecognised and therefore unremunerated (Brown, 2023; Kesküla, 2021; Saraf, 2016). In his ethnography of an industrial zone in Andhra Pradesh in India, Jamie Cross (2009) shows how young men from lower class backgrounds feel that even newly acquired skills are devalued, as the distinctions between formal and informal work are eroded.

Distinctions between ‘expertise’ and ‘skill’, ‘high’ and ‘low’ skills, and ‘knowledge’ versus ‘physical’ labour, further structure how skill, and the people performing it, are valued. Heslop and Jeffery (2020) show that for the road construction sector in the Maldives archipelago, notions of skill and capacity become powerful cultural idioms of social distinction, shaping migratory labour relations. On the lowest rung of the labour hierarchy, Bangladeshi labourers classified as ‘nonskilled’ have practical knowledge and improvisational abilities that are necessary for road construction but are not recognised, and they are socially marginalised. Mid-level Sri-Lankan foremen, by contrast, classified as ‘skilled’, accrue social status for their managerial work and from operating machines. They see their skill as a source of personal betterment and achievement, and they are socially incorporated through invitations to weddings and festivals on the island. Managers of the road construction company, taken for granted as having skills, focus less on their own

technical expertise than on social finesse and developing social networks for new projects, enabling their further upward mobility.

Skill as social recognition has played out in a particular way in South Africa. Here, historically and socially constructed distinctions between 'skilled', 'semi-skilled', and 'unskilled' work have long shaped social hierarchies along racial lines. During the colonial and apartheid eras, 'skill' was understood to be racially conditioned, with different race groups having different 'natural' predispositions. Since the 1890s, skills training for 'poor Whites' (and to a lesser degree Coloureds) became a major policy focus, as a means to insulate Whites from competition from cheaper Black labour, and to prevent racial degeneration more broadly (McGrath, 1996). From the 1920s, following major labour strikes among White workers, the 1922 Apprenticeship Act and a raft of other legislation firmly entrenched the notion of skilled work as the domain of Whites (and to a lesser degree Coloureds). Skill became infused over time with moral meanings about the value of industriousness, connected to thinking on what it meant to be a civilised Christian, and about proper social order (Badroodien, 2004).

While White people were projected as naturally predisposed to higher skill work, and ownership of capital in an industrial economy, African people were seen as homogenous and replaceable, capable only of menial jobs and the tasks of 'traditional society' (McGrath, 1996). The skill status of Coloured workers, however, was often more ambiguous (see Chapter 2). Coloured workers (mostly male) occupied a central place in the Cape economy as skilled and semi-skilled workers, alongside Whites, from the mid nineteenth century. In 1865, when for the first time a systematic census was taken, forty six per cent of artisans in the Cape were Coloured (the rest were White) (van Duin, 1989, p.96). Even so, they received different wages for the same work as Whites, and White workers often refused to participate in the

same work or in the same unions as Coloured workers (Simons and Simons, 1983, pp.27-28). A government commission in 1912 wrote:

It is difficult to decide whether the rate of pay given to the skilled coloured worker – lower than that of the white – is due to his being less skilful than the white, or merely because of his colour.⁹⁵

While Coloured workers occupied a unique middling position in the colonial and apartheid-era labour markets, recognition of their skills was often made ambivalent by contested ideas about Coloured workers as inferior to Whites, and as deviant, alcoholic, or even workshy.⁹⁶

What the South African case illuminates is how the very process of skills training is a site for the reproduction of socioeconomic hierarchy and livelihood differences, shaped profoundly by processes of recognition and valuation. But, like contemporary ethnographic accounts, this historical account describes a labour scarce context in which exploitation or under-recognition by employers is the central issue. This begs the question, yet to receive sustained focus in the critical ethnographic literature on skills, of what ‘skill’ and skills development amount to in the context of chronic unemployment. What meanings, practices, and relationships characterise ‘skill’ and skills development in such a context?

This chapter argues that to answer this question we must shift analytical attention from trainees and their fate in labour markets to the institutional work of making skill – including the everyday work of officials to render skill visible, countable and credible in the absence of jobs. This focus is a contribution to existing

⁹⁵ Union of South Africa, *Report of the Commission of Trade and Industries* (Pretoria: Government Printer, U.G. 10–12), Minority Report by W.A. Martin, 144, cited in P. van Duin, “Artisans and Trade Unions in the Cape Town Building Industry, 1900–1924,” in *The Angry Divide: Social and Economic History of the Western Cape*, ed. W. James and M. Simons (Cape Town: David Philip, 1989), 98.

⁹⁶ It is beyond the scope of this literature review to lay out the history of Coloured skills in South Africa. This topic has been treated in more detail in the thesis introduction and in Chapter 2, and further details can be found elsewhere (see Goldin, 1987; McGrath, 1996; van Duin, 1989).

studies which tend to background skills development officials, or focus primarily on their goals of inculcating discipline, time-keeping, and work readiness (for example Nambiar, 2013). The central dilemma here is not only whether training produces exploitable labour, but whether training produces labour at all – whether the certificates, unit standards, and audits that officials painstakingly assemble will register as valuable in an economy where jobs are few. In such a setting, the meanings of skills development come to centre less on employer recognition and demand. Instead, as this chapter shows, they centre on questions of professional credibility, and institutional recognition of and responsibility for, the unemployed, in the absence of such demand.

To begin the empirical discussion, I introduce what is at stake in officials' work of producing skill according to market demand amidst unemployment.

Officials perform the uncertain work of making 'skill'

Skills development is a central part of the Atlantis SEZ Company's programme to prepare the poor and unemployed in the area for market inclusion in new green technology markets. An official said, 'Our hope is that this talent will find a home in the SEZ'. The Annual Report (2022, p.41) explains this agenda:

Enabling and equipping the Atlantis community with industry relevant (future) skills is the key objective of the Skills Development (SD) workstream. This is done to ensure that Atlantis residents can access Greentech employment opportunities within the ASEZ made possible through its investors, project partners, as well as the global green economy. Ensuring investors and industry are met with readily available skills locally remains a focal point of the skills development initiatives. This commitment includes training that supports foundational learning, Science, Technology, Engineering, Maths (STEM) focused initiatives, and technical training for both unemployed and employed learners to support skills development in the workplace.

During my fieldwork, the zone company had two skills development specialists responsible for administering this programme. In this setting, making skill entailed not just administering technical trainings according to market demand, but ensuring that newly produced, marketable skill was visible and universally recognisable. By the time I began fieldwork the skills development officials had a skills database that was being filled with the personal information of skilled people in Atlantis. Next to each name was the ‘unit standard’ of the trainings they had received, linking their skills to formal accreditation systems. Every Friday the skills officials would dedicate the day to filling out this Excel spreadsheet with new entries. These were based on those who had completed trainings, who had applied for them, or on the CVs that were handed in at the office or sent in via email on a nearly daily basis.

This database was an important source of evidence that the specialists were doing their job of preparing a skilled labour force, and an employable population. Officials told prospective investors:

You can recruit your workers directly from us. We have a lot of talent coming out of our pipeline!

The database was also mobilised in meetings with government departments keen to assess the success of the company in preparing people for work. This evidence was crucial in a context where, as one official put it, ‘The only metrics that seem to matter [to government] are investment in millions of Rands and jobs, jobs, jobs!’. Another official explained that:

It’s different in this kind of environment where the jobs aren’t there yet because the investors aren’t there yet. Yet you are being measured on job creation.

This focus on representations of ‘skill’ is not to say that programme participants were not technically equipped with new capabilities or that no one ever got jobs. Programme participants were technically trained in a variety of skills relevant to the ‘green economy’: among other things, solar panel and geyser installation and maintenance, welding, boiler making, and mechanical fitting, for example. On many occasions trainees could be found in workshops practicing their welding and cutting and mending on the weekends, in some cases preparing for exams. The skills development specialists proudly shared updates and photos of such ‘hard work’ and ‘new talent’ to the rest of the company on WhatsApp. Some programme participants also got follow-up apprenticeships to further develop these skills. Even so, in a context without many job opportunities, the value of skills development, and of officials’ own work and status as ‘specialists’, was in question.

In the first instance, to demonstrate their ‘specialist’ credentials, officials needed to demonstrate their proper knowledge of existing ‘supply and demand’. An official said:

Our training needs to be relevant. We can’t bring in investors without skilled labour and the right skills. If we’re talking about the green economy, we need to train people to be employed in that sector.

Central here were the two skills audits by private consultancies, one of which had been drawn up on behalf of GreenCape in early 2019, and the other for the zone company in 2020.⁹⁷ In my first conversation with the lead skills specialist, Liz, she

⁹⁷ The consultancy responsible for the first audit describes itself as focussing on ‘human capital in renewable energy’ and has offices in South Africa, several countries in Africa, and the United Kingdom. It had worked with a major South African university to make a prediction of the number of jobs that would be created in renewable energy in South Africa, particularly in the Northern Cape. And it had collaborated with GIZ to figure out the skills needs and job creation potential of the biogas sector in South Africa.

explained that ‘nothing can be done without the audit’, and that it was essential to ensuring that their interventions were planned ‘according to need’. They drew closely on the audit to assess this ‘need’. The latest audit included a detailed spreadsheet of different green technology sectors in which it was recommended the company skill people – such as in ‘renewable energy’, ‘energy storage’, ‘resource efficiency’, ‘transportation’, ‘water and wastewater’, and ‘recycling and waste’, each broken up into various subsectors. The audit identified ‘gaps’ and possible interventions, according to projected demand in each sector. Talking to Liz about the audit one day, she said:

I’ll never forget that first braai [barbeque] with [the head of the project at the time] at Saldanha. I portrayed some bias and ignorance just about the status quo without having delved into the skills audit. I noticed it frustrated him.

She laughed nervously before going on more seriously:

But only later I understood. So, I think tackling it from that whole skills audit, evidence-based and research-oriented perspective is obviously what is necessary. The skills audit needs to be informed by research. But it can’t just be desk-based. It needs to be informed by speaking to industry, all of that. And that’s exactly what we did. And then basically the results of the audit then inform the direction where we invest our funding.

The skills development officials spoke to me candidly about the various forms of mastery they had acquired to succeed in their roles. Liz, the lead skills specialist, had a Politics, Philosophy and Economics (PPE) degree from a local online university, and began specialising in skills under GreenCape a couple of years earlier. Liz demonstrated her prowess in the field to me one day, explaining how she had taught the team. Between meetings, Liz swivelled her wheely chair next to mine, scanning through the electronic files on her laptop for a slideshow presentation she

had made called ‘Skills 101’. She found a .jpeg picture of a colour coded table, enthusiastically dubbing it ‘a neat little image that puts everything in a box’. She was showing me the ‘OFO’ (Organising Framework of Occupations), which she described as ‘a coded classification system covering all occupations’.

NSDS	NQF Level	Skill Level	OFO Major Groups
HIGH	10	4	2 Professionals
	7		
INTERMEDIATE	6	3	3 Technicians and Associate Professionals
	5		
	4		
ENTRY	3	2	4 Clerical Support Workers
	2		5 Service and Sales Workers
	1		6 Skilled Agricultural, Forestry, Fishery, Craft & Related Trades Workers
			1
			8 Elementary Occupations

Figure 18: OFO table from Liz's slides

On the table, she pointed out the ‘NQF’ (National Qualification Framework) levels, explaining that Levels 1-4 correspond to school-level, NQF 9 is Master’s-level and NQF 10 is PhD. She said:

[NQF levels] guide where you can intervene and what training is needed. You need to check what prior learning is in place. When you are designing a skills intervention, it can’t be mapped onto an NQF that is too high or too low.

At the time the company was planning to run an Occupational Health and Safety Officer training for which I had to draft a tender brief to recruit a service provider to deliver the training. I asked Liz which NQF level was suitable for this. I tentatively

suggested NQF Level 3, which would correspond to a school level equivalent of skill according to the framework. She responded to my observation:

That's sensible hey. You can't take for granted that people have Matrics [completed high school]. For welders, technical construction guys, they leave school at Grade 9 [age 15]. They opt out of school and go the technical college route.

Liz's junior, Lucinda, had less experience in the field. She worked previously as a secretary for a local politician and as administrator for a local school board. Lucinda, in contrast to Liz, expressed anxiety about how technical the work was. She had applied for the job because she was unemployed but did not expect to get it. She said:

I would never ever have imagined that I would work for the SEZ. I saw the advert and I applied... And then I received a call from HR [human resources] and I was informed that I was shortlisted. And because of my age I thought, "Am I still employable?" So, I said "Sure", put my best foot forward for the interview, *ja ja*, I was fortunate to be successful.

When I asked her about how she became proficient in the role she told me earnestly:

It was quite an adjustment, but I upskilled myself. I did a facilitator training and that helped a lot. The key thing is we are guided by the skills audit. So that's how we determine what kind of training is needed. But that's only the surface because along with that we have things like unit standards, what unit standards will be covered, will this be accredited training. We have different kinds of trainings at the SEZ and not all will be accredited but we have realised there is way more value in giving accredited training from a SETA or institutions that we are working with. So that is what I have learnt through my upskilling.

Despite the emphasis that these specialists placed on following both the audit, and the rigid and numerically coded technical frameworks meant to help match

supply with demand, the work of preparing skills for markets was highly uncertain. Technocratic claims about the certainties provided by the skills audit belied underlying doubts about the nature of ‘market demand’, and over the actually existing skill levels already in the population. In practice, officials were reflexively aware that positivist notions of ‘skill’ as commodities to be produced and supplied to markets did not apply in their own work. This posed epistemological and bureaucratic challenges as much as ethical dilemmas: the vision of preparing people with ‘green skills’, to render them included in ‘sustainable’ and ‘green’ jobs, in practice often collapsed under the practical difficulties of a situation where people and their ‘skills’ might become ‘redundant’ or go unrecognised by prospective employers.

Officials admitted they did not know which skills were going to be demanded by industry in future, as they had little certainty about which kinds of investors would actually land in the zone. Liz said that when she initially interviewed to work on the project, about ten years prior, she was asked to prepare a case study presentation about how she would approach a skills audit for a Danish multinational wind turbine rotor blade manufacturer. That manufacturer was at the time expected to invest in the SEZ, but Liz exclaimed to me: ‘[The same company] has been in the pipeline since then!’ She sighed:

So, we are always careful to go too investor focused. Because using [the Danish multinational] is a good example. If we were to have started skills development in composite manufacturing to support the manufacture of wind turbine blades for an investor – well, that investor’s not materialised!

She added:

Because of market forces, you have a plan and then the reality of implementing it in practice means you divert from the plan!

Liz and Lucinda, and the rest of the community, skills, and enterprise team, often had conversations about the uncertainties of providing trainings for future ‘demand’, and the implications this had for their vision of ‘green jobs’. Many were aware that, notwithstanding the guidance from the audit, it was unclear what ‘green jobs’ really were, in a context where investment prospects were uncertain, and green technology was rapidly evolving. When I joined the team, its executive (Liz and Lucinda’s superior), asked me to research ‘green jobs’. This same executive often went on long tangents in meetings about ‘all the possibilities’. She once had a ‘brain wave’ about running a fashion programme teaching young people to make clothes from recycled and upcycled materials, like old tyres or old industrial parts from factories. She exclaimed excitedly, ‘It’s not just the circular economy but it’s about how people can make a living from this!’ The team started pitching in other ideas about indigenous gardening and marijuana as important sectors for ‘green skills’. Amidst this excitement though, the executive expressed uncertainty:

We are talking about green jobs which have not been identified yet which are linked to the SDGs and the shift from coal and all that. But there are a lot of unknowns.

In practice, this uncertainty meant sacrificing ideals about ‘green’ jobs and skills, in favour of more ‘general’ skills. In the conversation about the Danish rotor blade manufacturer that had been in the pipeline for ten years, Liz explained, ‘So this is where we deliberately decided to not train too niche.’ In meetings there was often talk of going for quantity of trainings (‘low hanging fruit’), rather than expensive specialised training. The officials pondered the ‘implications’ of this sacrifice: ‘What are the implications of everyone just going into factory jobs as general workers?’

Despite all the insinuated negative connotations of ‘factory jobs’ as low-paying, unfulfilling and exploitative, this was, it was said, better than providing skills trainings that would leave people ‘redundant’.

Beyond the uncertainties of market demand, officials faced further epistemological uncertainties, in diagnosing the available ‘supply’. Whether Atlantis residents were hugely deficient in skills (diagnosed as a major cause of their unemployment), or whether they, in fact, already had skills, was a constant source of tension. This reflects an historical legacy, described earlier in this chapter and developed more fully in Chapter 2, wherein Coloured workers have historically been socially and politically constructed both as ‘natural workers’, and as ‘weak’ and ‘workshy’.

On the one hand, officials described the population as deficient in skills, which they claimed was supported by the audit. Liz said:

We know there are low literacy levels here – and this applies to different kinds of literacy: numbers, digital literacy. We know this through the audit that when they do a literacy test before an interview the people tend to fail the tests. As for digital literacy – how many people reply to our emails? Who has to go to an internet café to send an email. It’s actually shocking. They can’t use email and WhatsApp like elsewhere in the country.

Such analysis was reinforced by conversations and interviews they had with existing employers in Atlantis, and with prospective investors. Existing employers complained of a lack of ‘basic problem-solving skills’ and a lack of a ‘culture of learning’ in the younger generations of the Atlantis community. Liz said:

A lot of industry says they are happy to teach the technical capabilities, because you know it’s their, I forgot the term, “technical selling point”. But they say, “Give us young people or talent that can problem solve.” *Basics* need to be in place. And these

are the clear failings with our education system. Systemic failings. So that whole disconnect and skills mismatch is what we are sitting with.

Arguments about skills deficiencies slid into other kinds of arguments about dispositions, where residents were often cast as workshy or even lazy and disinterested in upskilling themselves. One of the officials explained to me that ‘especially the young people, they don’t want to take the opportunities given to them’, and, upon my probing about *which* opportunities, he insisted that there ‘are jobs out there that people could apply for’. On another occasion, programme participants of a certain training had complained about their post-training placements being in a factory as ‘general workers’ (instead of in higher skilled or more prestigious positions). One of the company interns, himself from Witsand, the nearby informal settlement, said ‘many people would kill for those placements’, and suggested that they should go to others who would appreciate them more.

Officials complained that residents’ lack of work-friendly dispositions made their own work of upskilling difficult, or even ‘impossible’. They linked such problematic tendencies to ‘intergenerational poverty’, or to high levels of alcoholism in the area. In the official skills audit, which drew on employer interviews, it was recorded that local workers, who are mostly Coloured, are prone to drug abuse and alcoholism. Such diagnoses bring to light the wider structural challenges of trying to inculcate ‘work-friendly’ dispositions in a chronically unemployed population. But they also bear traces of deeply rooted stereotypes about Coloured people in South Africa. These stereotypes posed further difficulties: to what extent would the provision of official accreditations of technical skills really be recognised by investors as trustworthy evidence that local people would make good and competent employees?

Inherited racial stereotypes, and their implications for socially constructed understandings of 'skill' in the broadest sense, challenged the boundaries between officials' own status as professionals, and the people they sought to upskill. The judgement of Atlantis residents as 'alcoholic', and therefore as lacking the appropriate soft dispositions, spilled into Coloured officials' own working lives. Because the offices were rented space in an existing factory area, we all shared the same reception with the factory owners and workers. Every morning, we would have to sign in, and on some occasions, the receptionist would 'randomly' make staff do breathalyser tests. My Coloured colleagues felt that they were the ones specifically targeted for these tests. Those who were not devout Muslims or Christians (for whom alcohol was indecent), told me in confidence that they were too scared to drink on a Sunday evening in case it got picked up at work and risked their job.

Underlining this was officials' sense of anxiety about their own credibility as skills development specialists. Liz lamented:

In an ideal world, you know, like, we [skills development specialists] wouldn't really exist! Because you know schools would be creating...No, that sounds wrong...

She paused, pensive, before going on:

The output of schools would be what universities need and what industry wants! And we are somehow supposed to close that gap.

In wider team meetings, discussions around skills provision came with expressions of intense anxiety about the intractability of skills deficiencies. At the end of a meeting one of the skills officials said ironically, indicating the sense that the work was difficult and unforgiving, 'Does anyone want to join skills team?! *Yaaaay.*' This sarcastic tone was matched on other occasions by tears and overwhelm.

On the other hand, in contrast to depictions of a work-shy population ‘lacking basics’, on other occasions the officials cast local residents as having a ‘deep legacy skills base’, and as ‘desperate for work’. Liz said, ‘We know there is a massive skills base in Atlantis. This was once a thriving industrial area.’ Lucinda told me she was always confident that people would sign up to their trainings out of ‘desperation for opportunities and jobs’. Liz even once called the people who recycled through various skills and enterprise programmes run by the zone, and by other government departments, as ‘addicts’, implying that many already had the required skills to get jobs even before attending trainings.

Indeed, part of the company’s value proposition to investors was not only that they were preparing a skilled labour force through interventions, but that one already existed in the form of ‘legacy skills’. Part of their job, then, was ensuring those available skills were officially accounted for. Lucinda told me, ‘We are continually going to malls saying, “Give us your CVs, IDs, two references, so we can take that list to employers.”’ Moreover, during my fieldwork, the company started a ‘Recognition of Prior Learning’ programme to provide certifications to those with technical abilities learned from previous work experience. In a meeting, Liz said, ‘How do we intervene so these people’s skills are attached to a piece of paper, and they are able to get a job?’

Preparing ‘green skills’ according to market demand is fraught with epistemological, bureaucratic, and even ethical challenges for those seeking to demonstrate their own ‘specialist’ status in the field, bringing into question the credibility and efficacy of their roles. The skills development officials for the Atlantis SEZ worked hard to render the population’s skills levels measurable and manageable. But underlying uncertainties, about both market demand and the actual capabilities of the population in historical context, made the apparently technical

task of ‘closing the skills gap’ highly doubtful and anxiety-inducing. Officials deliberated over the potential of preparing a skilled population that might be ‘redundant’ to markets, or else condemn workers to be merely ‘general workers’, throwing their mandate and commitment to ‘green skills’ into question. But they also grappled with the potential irrelevance of their own roles, in a setting where the very status of ‘skill’ in the population was highly uncertain and employers appeared less interested in skills than in ‘basics’. That emphasis on ‘basics’ referred to actual capabilities, yet resonated with longstanding racial stereotypes of Coloured people in the workplace.

To fully appreciate officials’ pursuit of recognition and credibility for their own specialist roles, their concerns about their work need to be situated in the wider context of Atlantis, among the population they sought to upskill. In the following section, I lay out why residents might choose to partake in upskilling in a setting with few jobs. I show that aspirations to become skilled are rooted in an ethos of self-improvement and advancement. But more than this, partaking in skills development is about securing recognisable evidence of skill. In Atlantis, many viewed their unemployment as the result not of a lack of skill, but a lack of employer recognition. Many viewed paperwork, as opposed to skill itself, as the key to securing recognition from future employers. But, in this context of mass unemployment, the company’s skills development programme refracted wider aspirations for recognition among residents – recognition of abilities, but also personal worth more broadly. This was not only from prospective employers, but from the zone company and from officials themselves.

Residents upskill themselves: From employer to public institutional recognition

For Atlantis residents, skills development was, at one level, understood as a means to prepare oneself for potential future jobs or entrepreneurial opportunities, often talked about in terms of self-improvement and self-advancement. Nicolette, a forty-year-old local resident from Dura Flats (one of the poorest parts of Atlantis), said:

You don't have an excuse anymore. You are not going to complain after this, because why? Here is your opportunity! If we are going to not seize this opportunity, we are going to lose everything. We are still gonna have a big corporate company coming in [to the zone], but I pray that we gonna be ready for whatever's gonna be there... [so we can] get some money and have a better life.

Nicolette described upskilling as a duty of self-responsible individuals in pursuit of a 'better life'. Another resident, who had completed one of the zone company's IT skills courses, described in detail all the new capacities she had acquired, and her excitement about all this would enable her to do. She said, only half joking:

Now I can use CC/BCC [technical acronyms associated with emailing] *what-what*. I only used to know how to turn on the computer and click "movies". Now I can open Word and PowerPoint.

She elaborated excitedly that once she had a laptop of her own, 'if [she] could get the money for it', she could write up a business plan for the café she planned to start in her backyard.

For others still, skills development was less about acquiring new skills than acquiring new 'papers', and new entries to put on their CVs. Every day, unemployed people came into the office saying they heard it was the place to get papers. Socialising in the community one weekend, someone said of the zone company:

If you don't have papers, Lucinda at the SEZ is able to give you papers for work that you have done your whole life, that will be recognised. The SEZ will give you your very own papers!

One resident, Chantel, was completing a Community Liaison Officer course, which would prepare her to take a managerial role on construction sites. When I found out she had already performed this role before, and hence already had the relevant skills, I asked her why she wanted to do the training. She said in Afrikaans '*Ek weet! Maar ek wil net n papier hê!* [I know! But I just want a paper!]' Others spoke of 'just wanting something new to put on their CV'.

The emphasis on formalised certification superseded that put on actual skills. This is a feature of demand-led skills systems more broadly (Allais, 2020; Allais, 2022). Particularly in contexts where opportunities are scarce, there is often competition for credentials, to make oneself more competitive than peers. Paperwork has been shown to occupy a central place in economic life more broadly. Paperwork is often seen as a channel to new desired identities (Prince, 2014) and to formal market participation (Bolt, 2017), not least because of its formalistic aesthetic qualities (Hull, 2012).

Here, commitments to having proper paperwork reflected underlying anxieties about the recognition of personal worth by employers in a context of widespread joblessness. A young man at a community Worker's Registration Event explained that he had done myriad skills trainings but struggled to find work. He lamented:

I apply for a job and then, "Ah sorry you didn't make it." My CV just gets thrown into the dust. Nobody cares about me!

He threw his hands in the air, about to stop, before continuing,

I end up thinking, “Ag, I’m nothing, I’m really stupid.” Do you understand? All I needed is somebody to tell me where on my CV is there an error.

Alister’s comments here reveal his belief that it was not because of his lack of skills that he was unemployed, but because of the invisibility or non-recognition of such skills by prospective employers. This, he understood, was a product of his CV having an ‘error’ of some kind, which, he felt, rendered him apparently unworthy of ‘care’. As if underlining his own feelings of personal error, he was holding a DoL brochure which read:

To secure an opportunity:

- make sure your CV is well typed
- CV must be easy to read
- Use one side of paper only

Residents’ concerns about the (non)recognition of their existing skills informed how they viewed the company’s skills development programme itself. In a community stakeholder meeting a resident, Jackson, stood up and shouted:

Two skills audits said we had no skills. But I have a coding master’s sitting next to me. They never showed us the skills audit. *Ons moet vir die CSN vra om uit te vind wat die ASEZCo gedoen het om seker te maak daar is vaardighede in die gemeenskap, of gaan ons weer hoor “Atlantis-mense het geen kapasiteit nie”* [We need to ask the CSN to find out what the ASEZ company has done to make sure there are skills in the community, or are we going to hear again that “the people of Atlantis have no capacity”]?

Here, Jackson was giving voice to the anxiety expressed by many that their community was represented as one with ‘no capacity’, and that this was a reason, heard again and again, that many were unemployed. He suggested that the zone

company had a duty to ensure not only that the community was equipped with skills, but also that already existing skills were adequately recognised. The failure to document existing ‘capacity’ here was framed not just as an issue of technicalities, but as a far more significant matter of recognition and valuation of people. Someone else stood up and interjected, ‘We have lots of intelligence and capacity!’ Jackson then went on:

It’s not supposed to be like that. Atlantis is still like a stepchild here, and apartheid is long over. And we are a stepchild!

Here, the accusation that the zone company’s skills audits failed to properly capture existing skills, and that skills development programmes failed to adequately prepare people for jobs, is framed as a reflection of Atlantis’ neglected status in the post-apartheid polity. Like a ‘stepchild’, Atlantis residents described themselves as feeling undervalued and deprived of the benefits of a programme that they often cast as being ‘for them’.

Helpful here, Jan Grill’s (2018) ethnography of work readiness ‘activation works’ in Slovakia explores what skills training means among the long-term unemployed. In such a setting, the meanings accrued to work readiness trainings are shaped less by aspirations for work itself, so much as by other ideas about recognition and deservingness, in work’s absence. Grill shows how participants attempt to cultivate the appearance of being hard working and ‘active’ (as opposed to work-shy and passive). They do so in an attempt to shore up their own ‘deservingness’, and their entitlement to welfare and full social membership in the citizenry. This is helpful to begin to set out how, amidst chronic unemployment, the recognition sought through skills training is often not only from potential employers, or about work-based capacities. Rather partaking in formalised schemes might offer

forms of recognition associated with political membership, belonging, and entitlements to care from public institutions (Ferguson, 2013; Muehlebach, 2012) precisely in the absence of what might be termed ‘work-based membership’ (Ferguson, 2015).

Residents’ desires to be seen and valued as ‘skilled’, not just by employers but by the zone company, in turn affected how skills development officials viewed their own work. In a context where skills trainings do not automatically translate into jobs, the meanings attached to skills development far surpass considerations of supply and demand. They incorporate a wider set of meanings about institutional responsibility: about officials’ intentions and sincerity in their roles, and the scope of officials’ duty towards residents as people worthy of institutional and interpersonal recognition and ‘care’.

The scope of specialists’ responsibility for the unemployed

Residents took issue with the quality of the skills development programme, and the credibility and even sincerity of officials. Liz was sharply criticised on multiple occasions. For example, an Atlantis resident had written an article about her in the local *Weskus News* (for which the Project Management Unit at the time had tried to sue for defamation). In a conversation with the article’s author, he repeated these complaints, telling me that he believed she had ‘wasted’ (and even pilfered) the funds ‘meant for the people of Atlantis’; that she lacked the appropriate sincerity towards residents; and that she lacked the relevant skillset for her role, and was responsible for the lack of job creation in Atlantis to date. He said:

Sy het nie die kapasiteit nie [She does not have the capacity]! If you can't do it, you need to ask for help. But another thing this community won't engage with her because her style is offensive!

When I asked for clarification about what he meant by her 'style' he explained that she did not 'treat people right'. He alluded both to what he felt was the appropriate way 'to treat Coloured people', and to ideals of consultation and inclusivity regarding the design of, and sharing information about, the programme. When Liz eventually left the company to take up a role in a sustainability non-profit (in part, she told me, because she was so frustrated with dealing with accusations from the community), he told me he was 'relieved' and said the role should go to someone else 'who really cares'. When programmes meant to render people valuable to markets fail to do so, officials themselves are questioned. At stake is not only their own technical abilities and specialist status, but assessments of the sincerity of their obligations towards the people they are supposed to be helping.

The prospect of criticism from residents influenced how officials thought about and approached their own roles. At one level, officials were concerned about their reputations among residents. In the instance described earlier, when programme participants had complained about being placed as 'general workers', Lucinda emphasised in informal office conversation that they needed to 'protect [themselves] as the ASEZCo'. She said they should draw up documents in future stating exactly what programme participants should expect from trainings. Another instance that produced reputational anxiety among officials was when they delivered a skills training that, they found out after the eight-week course was over, was not properly accredited, and trainees complained. The executive of the team said in a meeting:

There have been complaints from students who have still to date not been certified. I'm very wary of the community response and not having a plan. People could say, "We lost out on an opportunity because you messed up."

But beyond merely 'protecting' their own reputations from accusations of 'messing up', the officials often talked conscientiously about the quality of the skills trainings they were providing. They expressed needing to ensure that trainings were 'up-to-standard' and would be recognised by employers 'to ultimately make sure that the community is happy out there'. In the same meeting described above, the executive said, 'We need to make sure there is a recognition for what's been done'. Together the officials devised a plan to bring all the participants back for a further four weeks to supplement their existing training and ensure it became accredited. The executive went on:

That's what I want to offer them: "You waited for twelve months but you will get certified." Instead of rolling out something new, this is something I would want to complete and if it requires money, we have money for that. They need to have something to show that they have completed it. If we forgo fifteen other people training this year, at least we can say we stuck through and completed this.

The executive here demonstrated her sincere commitment – despite the potential costs, and the stress of reorganising and rebudgeting – to ensuring beneficiaries received proper certification and 'recognition' for their skill.

Officials also reckoned with other demands from residents, derived less from continued expectations for, than the absence of, promised jobs in the SEZ. One resident repeatedly complained about 'the way the SEZ is skilling people'. She said, 'They are skilling us for industries and jobs that *might* come in five years. But what about today?' Residents suggested alternate skills that might already be in demand elsewhere than the SEZ. Someone said, 'There is need for truck drivers today, why

are they not giving people those skills?’ In response, officials talked about what skills to provide to ensure people would not become redundant (which I demonstrated earlier).

But residents made other demands on the programme (which I describe in more detail in the final section). In response officials took pains to reflect on what assistance they could provide that would actually be of use to residents – given the lack of employment opportunities. This was illustrated on one occasion in a discussion about the importance of stipends. An official said:

You can’t train unemployed people – they will be at the training all day and go home with nothing. There must be a stipend.

The skills development officials also had an ‘open door policy’, wherein they accepted walk-ins throughout the day with people coming to drop their CVs, or, more informally, to ask for various kinds of assistance. Once during a team meeting in the board room, I got up to close the door because of noise outside. Lucinda then went to open it again, reminding me, ‘We need to be here for people when they come.’

The broader range of assistance that officials provided entailed a view of residents not just as subjects to be skilled, but as people with a broader range of needs. Liz said, ‘Skills development is for a person, not a robot.’ I often overheard long conversations between my colleagues and Atlantis residents, talking about their private lives, families, and financial struggles.

Taking a more expansive view of those they aimed to assist, meant widening how they viewed their own roles as well. Lucinda explained that she felt her role far exceeded her formal KPIs, in that it entailed wider forms of ‘care’:

People are just coming. I don't think they should consider making it a KPI. They should just leave us and let us get on. I don't want to group it into something, it should just be me as Lucinda being helpful to someone, listening to them, taking that time and care to be helpful.

Liz too contrasted the official rationale of skills development as geared towards job creation and investment with her own personal motivations, based on a sense that she was helping people in a more informal, and even holistic way. She explained:

We had a call with [the Western Cape Government] and they wanted to know how much impact have we made and I said, "Well, can you start with defining what "impact" means to you?" That's not a metric. For some people it's fifty million turn over a year and for me it's working with people who have just a SASSA [South Africa Social Security Agency] grant. Very informal, nothing glamorous, but for me that's huge impact.

This sense of responsibility towards unemployed people ('who have just a SASSA grant') was expressed in various terms. Officials borrowed the language of CSR, making moralising statements like, 'It is our duty as a company to ensure that there is inclusion.' But where 'inclusion' officially meant market participation, officials described obligations to provide more substantive evidence that they cared about the outcomes for participants, in the context of their own lives. This is reflected in officials' adoption of more informal idioms, such as that of a parent-child relationship. One of the officials said to me:

I sometimes wonder what does my role entail? Someone told me this morning that I am like the mother. I was thinking, "the mother?!" But it is like that.

Another official compared the company to a 'children's home', explaining that there was an 'emotional and psychological dimension' to helping people 'develop

themselves’, and spoke of themselves and colleagues as ‘social workers caring for our children’. This comment reflects a more pervasive framing through which many South African citizens imagine their relationships with the state more broadly. In a major political opinion survey from 2009, a majority of South Africans agreed that ‘People are like children, the government should take care of them like a parent’ (Afrobarometer, 2009). James Ferguson (2013, p.237), citing the survey, suggests that the idiom reflects ‘needs for care, moral connection, and responsible obligation’, especially among the unemployed (see also Englund, 2008). Where ‘emancipatory liberal rights’ discourses, and ideals about market inclusion, tend to prize self-reliance and the ‘thinnest’ forms of social membership and recognition (Ferguson, 2013), here we see that skills development in practice is imagined as a site of more substantive, or what Ferguson terms ‘socially thick’, forms of interpersonal obligation. Officials conceptualised their roles not just in terms of equipping people with marketable skills but as showing more extensive forms of care about what these amounted to.

Amidst chronic unemployment, the meanings attached to skills development extend beyond skills provisioning for market demand, or even proper certification. In a setting where skills development officials are judged on the apparent failure to put people into work, skills development becomes loaded with wider meanings around the sincerity and scope of institutional and interpersonal obligation and responsibility towards the unemployed. Officials come to view residents not just as ‘robots’ needing to acquire new technical capabilities for the green economy and view their own roles as more expansive than their ‘KPIs’. As the final section will show, in this more expansive moral economy of skills development, these mutually imbricated struggles for recognition provide the grounds also for the unemployed to press wider claims for recognition of personal deservingness and for assistance.

A moral economy of skills development – and its limits

Relationships with the skills development officials offered residents a way to press for other, more informal kinds of assistance. These were based on expanded ideas about their deservingness of officials' time and care, often in piecing together lives and livelihoods without wage work. Residents asked for help with CVs and cover letters and filling in forms, and to use office resources like computers. They also sought other diverse forms of assistance, like asking for emotional support and advice, transport, or to share in meals and tea and coffee.

The example of Enid, a middle-aged woman living in Witsand, helps to explain this point. Enid had recently completed the zone company's training on sustainable agriculture. On the day of her graduation, when I was driving her home from the graduation ceremony (upon her request), she raved about her new skills and said she hoped she would be able to apply them in a job as an urban gardener of some sort. But, once we had arrived in Witsand, and as I was about to drive away, she called me to stop. Leaning through the window, in a whisper she asked me if I could not potentially hire her as a cleaner. Despite having acquired new skills and a certification meant to ready her for upward mobility through formal employment, Enid instead leant on the opportunity to make a more immediate claim: to be hired on a low-paying, informal basis as a cleaner. She assured me of her hard-working and reliable nature.

Her claims extended beyond asking for paid work, or recognition of work-friendly dispositions. She told me on another occasion that she had asked Lucinda and other company officials for 'help':

I opened up to Lucinda and the others because I know that they can take us far. So I spoke to them about all of us don't have computers, printers and all that. Maybe they can ask Vodacom [a telecommunications company] or whatever company for sponsors for us, those participants who graduated now. For those who haven't got, you must just be honest and say, "I don't have a computer or printer." And they can get sponsors for us maybe from them so we can also do our things. And I don't always have money to go to the internet thing to do my things. It's a lot.

These comments reflect Enid's optimism that the company could 'take [her] far' through helping her convert her new qualifications into printed CVs and documents, presumably to get a job wherein she could apply her new skills. But her claims were not limited to helping her get a job. The implication was that Enid believed she had enough interpersonal rapport with the skills specialists to be vulnerable with and 'open up' to them. She felt entitled to make a series of claims on them and the networks she believed them to have, to aid in her struggles to get by without work.

Enid was particularly keen that they find a way to extend the small stipend that she and others had been getting during the training programme. The official idea of stipends during skills training is that they should replace wages supposedly missed during training. But, for Enid and others, this stipend, together with their social grants (which she decried as far too little), was a major source of income. Enid said:

After the graduation, I asked Lucinda and she said she will look into a little stipend for one more month. Everyone [from the training] is on the WhatsApp group now saying, "Did you ask? Did you ask?" If everybody asks, maybe we can get something. I hope they [the company] will really help us move along.

As much as Enid, and others who took part in her training, hoped that their new skills would amount to jobs and upward social mobility, the relationships she had built with the officials, in the comparatively highly resourced institutional setting

of the zone company, offered more direct advantages. Enid and others felt that they were able to leverage their relationships with officials they perceived to be helpful and obliging, to press for temporary financial support in the absence of wages. I heard Enid talking to both Lucinda and Liz on separate occasions about her struggles in supporting her children, and about her marriage with her husband, who had left her. While totally beyond the scope of upskilling and job hunting, such interpersonal rapport and intimacy came to characterise the relationships between trainees and officials, underwriting appeals for support.

Thus we see how, amidst chronic unemployment, a demand-led skills programme generates meanings, practices, and relationships that overflow preparing skills for employers. Skills development programmes can become sites for interpersonal claim-making, as trainees appeal to officials for wider forms of recognition and assistance: not just as prospective skilled workers, but as deserving unemployed people needing help to make ends meet.

Yet claim-making itself requires a distinct kind of skill or finesse and ultimately does little to alleviate precarity. Relationship-building and repeated appeals often yield only limited rewards. As much as officials imagined themselves as meeting their obligations to ‘look after’ programme participants, and described these relations even as familial, these obligations were heavily circumscribed, and ultimately not binding. One day a skills programme participant came with a handwritten letter she wanted to use to apply for a job. She insisted that one of the officials type it up for her, which they started doing, but it took so long that halfway through my colleague snuck off to another room, where they gossiped about such a ‘pushy lady’. They were referring not just to this instance, but the broader range of requests this person often made – for assistance of various sorts. The implication was that the participant was pushing the bounds of the normatively appropriate claims

they should be making on officials. While the officials complied on this occasion, this was not always the case (like the requests for stipends to be extended beyond the term of the training, just described). While the skills development programme in practice provides a basis for demands for institutional responsibility and care from officials, the scope of this responsibility is ultimately circumscribed.

Conclusion

Building on perspectives that emphasise the social construction of 'skill', which cannot be separated from processes of recognition and valuation in social and political context, this chapter explored the meanings, practices, and relationships that characterise skills development amidst chronic unemployment. It argued that recognition remains central here.

Faced with unpredictable investor interest and an uncertain definition of 'green jobs', officials expend effort on audits, unit standards, accreditation systems and databases. These practices are bureaucratic and technical, but they are also performative. They promise to make skill count in the eyes of public funders and potential investors, and in the eyes of residents. They provide officials with tangible evidence of their own 'specialist' status, in a context where the dominant metrics emphasise investment and jobs yet to exist. Rendering skill visible thus becomes a means by which specialists defend their professional credibility.

The chapter then turned to residents' interpretations of skills and the skills development scheme. While new skills are often cast as avenues to self-improvement and self-advancement, with residents hoping to pursue new jobs or business opportunities, many partake not for skills but for the potential for employer recognition that new paperwork can provide. In a context of scarce jobs and many

job applications, certificates and updated CVs are given primacy over actual skills, which people feel go unrecognised in the labour market. More than this, residents hope for recognition from the zone company itself. The skills audit is viewed not just as a technical index of existing skills in the area, but as a measure of personal and collective worth – within the wider post-apartheid polity and in relation to the institution, which many feel neglects to value of peoples’ existing ‘intelligence and capacity’.

Bringing these different struggles for recognition together, the chapter showed that skills development amidst mass unemployment constitutes a certain kind of moral economy, that extends the official scope of demand-led training. Skills development becomes loaded with meanings that go beyond market demand to the scope of institutional and official responsibility for the unemployed in the absence of this demand. Officials express having obligations to assist and ‘care’ for residents: beyond delivering ‘quality’ certified trainings, they offer emotional support, and occasional informal material and financial assistance. They describe themselves in the idiom of a parent-child relationship as having extra-bureaucratic obligations to residents and describe their own roles as informally extending beyond their official KPIs. Residents, for their part, leverage skills trainings, graduations, and everyday office life to press claims on officials: for stipends, transport, food, and other forms of personal and livelihood assistance, even if on a conditional and precarious basis.

This chapter demonstrated further how a scheme promising employment and market inclusion, but not delivering meaningful opportunities, nonetheless persists in practice. Here, even as both officials and residents claim to be actively preparing for markets and jobs, they also act with awareness of the structural absence of these. Through this dual orientation to two contrasting potential outcomes at once, the programme becomes a site of struggle over actually existing forms of advantage

within the ambit of the institution in the interim. Both officials and residents pursue different kinds of recognition in work's absence and take advantage of opportunities to give and receive emotional and material assistance.

The final chapter of this thesis explores the Atlantis SEZ Company's third market inclusion programme: enterprise development. The programme is notionally geared towards equipping small business owners with the relevant business acumen, and compliance certifications, to participate in formal markets. But towards the end of my fieldwork this shifted dramatically. In what follows I show how the programme came to centre on a struggle over state distribution, with attendant worries about potential 'violence' and social disorder, that officials felt needed to be contained.

Chapter 6

Claiming a share: The trials and tribulations of SMME formalisation



Figure 19: SMME database registration drive (photograph by this author)

It is a sunny winter's day, and I am joined by a group of small business owners and members of the Community Stakeholder Network at Island Place, infamous for being amongst the poorest and most dangerous areas in Atlantis. 'A place of drugs, gangsterism, and teen pregnancies' as one of its own residents once described it. Our group is planning to share information about the zone company's enterprise development programme and its Small, Medium, and Micro Enterprise (SMME) database.

An entrepreneur from Atlantis, Emanuelle, begins summoning people who are milling about. She gestures to some people who are standing by a minibus taxi in the parking lot, blasting loud music. Others, dragging a large branch to an open fire, look our way. To call those still inside the flats to join our gathering, someone shouts,

‘Mense is hier om ons van jobs te vertel [People are here to tell us about jobs]!’, substituting the English word jobs for the Afrikaans word *poste*.

With thirty eyes peering at her intently, squinting into the sun, Emanuelle asks loudly, ‘How many of you know about the Atlantis SEZ?’ Few in the crowd put up their hands. She goes on, unperturbed:

There is the Atlantis SEZ. It’s been around for a while, but they have only now just weeks ago signed money from government. R89 million for a construction project – all for the people of Atlantis! This is going to be the *renaissance* of Atlantis. It’s real and it’s coming!

Emanuelle explains that while the zone cannot offer jobs right now, the upcoming construction will provide opportunities for local businesses. She tells them that the zone company will help local business owners to get all their compliance documents up to date, and that people should register on their database if they want to take part. At this point, people start shushing loudly so they can hear better. She pauses, then continues:

If you have a business, the ASEZ will hold your hand through the entire process! You have no excuse not to sign up and get involved. These are our opportunities, and we must be ready to take them!

In this chapter I examine the zone company’s scheme to formalise SMMEs in Atlantis. At stake is not only entry into a ‘formal’ economy, but recognition of entitlement to public resources – R89 million allocated for a public construction project – in a context with few other avenues for formal livelihoods beyond social grants.

SMME formalisation – acquiring business skills and compliance documents required to operate in ‘formal’ regulated activity – is presented in official discourse as

a means of incorporating South Africa's poor into a single economic framework from which most were excluded under apartheid. Alongside BEE, it forms part of a broader agenda to promote upward mobility and social equality through business (see also Rajak, 2011).⁹⁸ The priority accorded to business and entrepreneurship sits squarely in the broader market inclusion paradigm, described throughout this thesis, which denigrates dependence on the state and normatively links political belonging and meaningful citizenship to economic productivity (Barchiesi, 2011; Cruikshank, 1999; Ferguson, 2015; Marais, 2011).

Yet over thirty years into democracy, formal economic incorporation has remained uneven. Poverty persists, unemployment is high, and small-scale entrepreneurial activity remains limited compared to elsewhere on the continent (Asmal et al., 2024; International Finance Corporation, 2018). In Atlantis, such exclusion is further refracted through the legacies of racialised planning and, many argue, post-apartheid race-based redress.

Beyond existing preoccupations with exclusion and 'informality', anthropological perspectives caution against taking economic 'formality' itself for granted (for example Bolt, 2021; Hull and James, 2012).⁹⁹ They explore what formalised arrangements are, and what they amount to in practice. This chapter contributes a focus on how formal processes and rules around business empowerment are constituted in practice and asks how these formal rules are socially sustained in a context with few avenues for meaningful economic participation.

⁹⁸ BEE, officially Broad-Based Black Economic Empowerment (B-BBEE), is a policy framework in South Africa designed to redress apartheid-era economic exclusions by increasing Black participation in the economy, through business.

⁹⁹ The idea of the 'informal economy' was coined by Keith Hart (1973) and has subsequently become the focus of sustained ethnographic and public attention (Meagher, 2018; Meagher and Lindell, 2013; Roitman, 2005). The concept has been critiqued for creating an overly stark binary with the 'formal' sector; and others have explored how the two interpenetrate in practice (Guyer, 2004; Hull and James, 2012; Shipton, 2007; Shipton, 2009; Shipton, 2010).

To answer this question, the chapter offers an account of the zone company's SMME formalisation drive in the lead up to a publicly funded construction project. In the latter months of my fieldwork, as alluded to in the opening vignette, the zone company finally secured R89 million from the DTIC to fund the roll out of civil works infrastructure for a section of the zone (called 'zone 1'). In accordance with the company's 'inclusivity' ideals, and with South African public procurement law, a portion of this project was to be broken down into 'work packages' reserved for 'local', and 'Black-owned' SMMEs (such as for paving, draining, and a guard house at the entrance to the zone). Officials launched an SMME registration and compliance drive to build a database of local SMMEs eligible to do 'business with government' legally.

The chapter argues that in this setting, SMME formalisation is sustained neither by deeply held commitments to entrepreneurialism as meritocratic market participation, nor by faith in the practical effectiveness of formalised rules and process. Instead, it emerges through the aggregated efforts of actors who recognise the limits of policy and regulatory scripts. Officials, invested in formalisation as a route to upward mobility yet struggling to secure database signups, appear acutely aware of the limited reach and authority of formal process. They complain that many do not 'see the value' in formalisation. In response, a group of entrepreneurs from Atlantis are recruited to assist. Aside from spreading the word about the database and encouraging people to sign up and 'get compliant', these entrepreneurs engage in lengthy meetings with company officials about the rules and procedures of their SMME inclusion process more broadly. But why do they do so?

Entrepreneurs, for their part, engage formality strategically. They suspect that rules may not be applied predictably and may instead reproduce their exclusion. Even as they showcase professionalised business identities, and perform a shared

commitment to formal process, this is not as a result of deeply held subjectivities about incorporation into the regulatory frameworks governing formal markets. More influential is a set of vernacular ideas about the grounds for entitlements to a share of public resources, and how to claim these, in the post-apartheid era. Entrepreneurs mobilise formal rules and institutions, or else seek to bend them, or even reach beyond them, in an attempt to have these more substantive entitlements recognised.

SMME formalisation is sustained as these different actors work to cultivate a shared set of sanctioned rules about distribution that suit their respective aims. Involvement in the formalisation drive becomes a way for entrepreneurs not only to try to influence the rules, and others' adherence to them, but to shape shared conceptions of what constitutes a fair distributive process. Officials likewise recognise that their efforts depend on collective recognition; if people feel 'left out', disruption may follow. Formalisation is therefore accompanied by officials' efforts to securitise and, if necessary, to mobilise the potential use of force. More important for officials, however, is the 'social capital' lent by local entrepreneurs who have invested in the process – intermediaries expected to help render distribution recognisable as rule-governed.

This chapter provides a final lens onto how the Atlantis SEZ project comes to persist in practice, even as it has yet to generate the jobs and market participation it promises. The previous two ethnographic chapters showed how residents help to shore up official representations of imminent, or at least plausible, market inclusion – a consulted community, a skilled labour force – often because they extract interim advantages such as recognition or marginal resources. Here, the focus shifts to enterprise development, where the stakes of cooperation are different. The resources on offer are more substantive, and so too is the risk of institutional breakdown should people withdraw their cooperation. What is at stake is the maintenance of a

formalised, rule-bound distributional order – or at minimum, its credible performance. It is this order on which future investment and market inclusion depend for their continued plausibility.

To make this argument, I first draw together a set of perspectives from the anthropology of enterprise development, and of economic formality, to establish a focus on SMME formalisation in a setting of chronic unemployment, and where public funds are often seen as an entitlement.

An ethnographic approach to the formalisation of market participation

South Africans have a long history of formalised economic incorporation through waged work. Now, amidst chronic unemployment, people are cast as ‘excluded’ from partaking in formalised productive activity. Even those with small businesses which are not officially registered and compliant are popularly defined as part of the ‘informal’ sector. A solution is enterprise development programmes, which aim to help equip the unemployed with business acumen, and the right habits and certifications, to participate in ‘formal’ activity.

Small business formalisation takes shape in practice against a longer history of regulated exclusion for Black, and particularly African, entrepreneurs (Hart and Padayachee, 2000; Krige, 2011; Kuper, 1965). Under apartheid, there were strict controls on entrepreneurial activity, and informal trading was severely repressed. Few Africans were granted trading licences, the location of African and Asian businesses was restricted, and the range of goods to be traded was limited (Seekings and Nattrass, 2005, p.142). The result is that, contrary to popular discourses about a booming ‘informal sector’ or ‘second economy’ (Alcock, 2015; RMB, 2022), informal trading has historically been on a relatively small scale in South Africa. A recent

study shows: ‘only 16 out of every 100 individuals actively searching for a job in South Africa find their way into informal sector activities’ (Asmal et al., 2024, p.2) compared to an average of 45 out of 100 in most middle-income economies. It is this ‘problem’ that enterprise development programmes try to solve.

There is an extensive anthropological literature on enterprise development schemes run by corporations seeking to demonstrate their ‘ethical’ credentials, and to benefit from new ‘bottom of the pyramid’ markets. Through such schemes, the poor and unemployed become incorporated into markets, at new frontiers of accumulation, often on adverse terms (Meagher, 2016; Meagher, Mann and Bolt, 2016). A particularly influential strand within this literature emphasises how such schemes inculcate ‘entrepreneurial’ subjectivities, through which the poor are encouraged to view their own precarity in heroized terms as ‘self-reliance’ and ‘resourcefulness’ (Dolan, 2012; Dolan and Rajak, 2016b; 2018; Rajak and Dolan, 2022; Roll, Dolan and Rajak, 2021).

Less attention in this field has been paid to enterprise development schemes run by public institutions. In South Africa, enterprise development has been a paramount focus for such institutions, in part because national regulatory requirements mandate them to do business with SMMEs. For example, as a quasi-public state institution the Atlantis SEZ Company has a public policy mandate, and specific legal entailments, to directly promote SMME formalisation. The 2014 SEZ Act enshrines enterprise development into law, describing it as key to ‘[broadening] economic participation’ (Government of South Africa, 2014, p.9). Moreover, during my fieldwork, the company was mandated by law to allocate a portion of its R89 million construction tender to SMMEs. South Africa’s public procurement legislation stipulates that for public tenders over the value of R30 million, at least thirty per cent of the value of the tender should go to SMMEs of ‘previously disadvantaged groups’,

typically from the surrounding area. For this to be legal, these SMMEs need to be registered and compliant, in other words, relatively formalised.

In this sense, enterprise development formalisation cannot be read purely as integration into the formal economy through incorporation into market networks. Instead, it is reminiscent of some of the contradictions of South Africa's economic formalisation more generally: a conservative macroeconomic regime geared towards investment attraction and private enterprise coexists with and relies on extensive state intervention, regulation, and spending (Hull and James, 2012).

For many of South Africa's small-scale entrepreneurs the state remains a major lifeline to resources. BEE has created an elite cadre of politically connected businesspeople who leverage state procurement to accrue wealth (Hirsch, 2005; Tangri and Southall, 2008). The concept of 'tenderpreneurs' has become popular to describe such individuals, often pejoratively associated with corruption and informal means of securing opportunities such as through personal connections to government officials (Piper and Charman, 2018), or else through pandering to party political values (McNeill, 2012).

The formalisation of SMMEs in Atlantis is entangled in this wider context where markets and business are championed as the pathway to upward social mobility, yet many people experience not incorporation in markets but rather exclusion from them.¹⁰⁰ During my fieldwork, even as zone company officials championed formalisation as a means to livelihoods and empowerment for locals, officials struggled to get enthusiastic participation, fearing that local businesses did not 'see the value' in compliance with formal regulations. The officials came to rely on the assistance of a group of local entrepreneurs to advance their formality agenda.

¹⁰⁰ Of course, the poor still participate through consumption. What I refer to here is specifically productive activity through which people can earn livelihoods.

Illuminating here, others in economic anthropology have explored how formality's expanding frontiers are given more concrete reality in practice. Hull and James (2012) characterise post-apartheid South Africa as a hybrid economy that can neither be characterised as 'neoliberal' nor welfarist. They ask how ordinary people navigate formal regulations and systems in such a setting, exploring how people adapt their expectations and forge new identities in flexible ways (see also James, 2011). They draw on perspectives from elsewhere on the continent, about the way state-regulated and legal-formal economic arrangements are upheld in 'piecemeal' (Guyer, 2004, p.157) fashion: they are made sense of in vernacular terms, and appropriated according to need, in the context of people's own lives. Despite the unusual reach of state regulation and the depth of capitalist development in South Africa, in comparison to some other countries on the continent, here too formality's abstractions and categories are advanced only through their grounding in everyday practices, interpretations, and the projects of ordinary people (see also Bolt, 2017; Bolt, 2021). Maxim Bolt (2021, p.982) argues that people 'sustain the everyday reality of the state's categories to achieve their own diverse ends'.

In Atlantis during my fieldwork, the local entrepreneurs who helped promote the formalisation agenda – spreading the word about the database in Atlantis, encouraging people to register and become compliant, and engaging with officials about the procedures of their SMME inclusion plan – had their own reasons, shaped in political and historical context. Their reasoning can only be described as plural: while they showcased commitments to 'professional' business identities, independence, and self-reliance, this dovetailed with a set of other commitments to secure what they felt were their own entitlements to a share of public resources, on the grounds of their membership as Atlantis 'locals', or else, as national citizens.

Enterprise development can be situated in a wider political economic context where it is not through markets that people secure incorporation, but often through more direct forms of state distribution in the absence of opportunities for market participation. Even as markets are hailed as the solution to poverty, a history of repressed SMME trading, coupled with rising structural unemployment, means that state distribution is the primary channel through which many can access livelihoods or substantive incorporation. For the middle classes, public sector employment is a mainstay (Southall, 2016) while those at the bottom end of the socioeconomic spectrum often rely for their livelihoods primarily on social grants (Ferguson, 2015). Indeed, despite criticisms of its 'neoliberal' characteristics, some argue that South Africa can better be characterised as a 'distributive regime' (because of massive social spending) (Seekings and Nattrass, 2005). James Ferguson (2015) writes about a 'new distributive politics' wherein citizens expect and demand financial assistance from the state. Others argue that, even where social grants are experienced as insecure or uncertain, many still feel entitled to state assistance with accessing work and other opportunities (Dawson and Fouksman, 2020).

This chapter argues that in a setting where promises of formal economic incorporation are set against a history of exclusion, processes of formalisation offer a means to have personal and collective interests recognised and asserted in a distributive regime. But with few guarantees. As Maxim Bolt (2021) further argues, formality is 'fragile'; it relies on constant maintenance by different actors. He suggests that 'the formal economy is distinguished by the way it is self-consciously maintained, and the fragility of its grounding in everyday performance' (2021, p.982). Officials try to explain and persuade of the relevance of official rules and terminology, and ordinary people choose to buy in, upholding fragments of process, while they 'undermine or sidestep others' (2021, p.988). Bolt (2021, p.990) proposes

that the primary efficacy of formal rules and categories ‘may be in stabilizing rituals and scripts that maintain the impression of a coherent and distinct formal register’.

In Atlantis, mistrust of formal process is inseparable from racialised histories of exclusion and redress. Coloured residents frequently narrate themselves as marginalised within the national polity, particularly in relation to post-apartheid empowerment perceived to favour African South Africans. At the same time, African residents fear marginalisation within Atlantis itself, where vernacular claims about being ‘local’ are shaped by a history of spatial regulation as a ‘Coloured’ homeland. In this setting, procurement categories such as ‘local’ and ‘Black-owned’ are not just administrative criteria; they become charged markers of distributive entitlement.

Entrepreneurs respond to this uncertainty by engaging formality strategically. Their promotion of professionalism and compliance does not rest on unqualified faith in meritocratic market participation. Rather, they mobilise formal categories to secure collective recognition of their entitlements, to guard against being bypassed, and to institutionalise definitions of belonging that might protect themselves and their constituencies. Where existing rules appear insufficient, they press for their modification; where enforcement seems doubtful, they cultivate shared narratives and informal solidarities that might shore up their claims in practice.

Officials, for their part, are acutely aware that their authority depends on social recognition. Reluctance to register on the database, and the spectre of disruption, expose how far sanctioned procedure depends on social uptake. Formalisation is therefore accompanied by efforts at persuasion, the cultivation of trusted intermediaries, and, at the margins, gestures toward securitisation. Officials too work to stabilise a collective recognition of the rules that otherwise cannot be taken for granted.

In what follows, I begin by introducing the company's enterprise development programme in the lead up to the construction of zone 1.

Rendering formal: Business with government as a vehicle for entrepreneurial empowerment

As in national policy discourse, the company officially frames enterprise development as a means through which poor and unemployed people can become connected to markets, to earn their own livelihoods. The 2021/22 Annual Report states:

Regional growth and its commensurate socio-economic impact are enshrined in the SEZ Act. This highlights the relevance of the Enterprise Development workstream in achieving these endeavours, to unlock growth opportunities for Atlantis SMMEs and businesses. This work focuses on supporting local businesses with knowledge and capabilities to tap into increased opportunities available in the area. This includes linkages to markets outside the Special Economic Zone and the greater green economy (Atlantis SEZ Company, 2022, p.41).

The enterprise development programme is a cornerstone of the zone's market inclusion scheme, and its claim to be an ethical business according to, among other things, the ideal of 'shared value'. Camille, the head of the programme, echoed this logic in explaining her role to me:

My goal is to ensure this community also benefits economically from value chains, so they can feel it in their pockets.

She cast the official logic as objective fact – as 'something we know' – going on to repeat the oft promoted idea that small businesses can be a vehicle for wider employment creation as well:

We do enterprise development so they can have a sustainable business and pay their staff. We know that in the future most jobs will actually be created by SMMEs. That's something we know.

Not only did she promote these abstract logics as a rationale for her work, but she described them as resonating with her 'intrinsic' principles, and as a reason for self-esteem and status in her career. She said, with zeal:

I took the job because it aligns with all the principles that I intrinsically believe in, this whole idea of empowerment. Also, I suppose from a career perspective I thought, "How cool would it be if my name was attached?!" I can say, "This is what I've done! I've set up one of the first green tech incubators on the continent!"

An 'incubator' she explained, is meant to 'equip business owners with the right ways of doing business, so they can compete'. Enterprise development trainings are vested with the imagined capacity to transform people into the right kind of capable and competitive market subjects. The zone's own enterprise programme offered multiple trainings to this end, focussed on instilling business acumen and financial management skills; helping SMMEs develop their 'networks'; and also teaching them to operate within the rules and regulations of the formal sector, not least through being up to date with compliance documents.

'This [the formal sector] is where the real opportunities for [entrepreneurs] growth lie,' one official said. This kind of dualist thinking that separates between a 'formal' and 'informal' economy can be traced, in part, back to modernist discourses of the 1950s and 60s, but was exemplified in post-apartheid policy discourse by former President Thabo Mbeki, who famously referred to a 'first' and a 'second' economy (Callebert, 2014). In Atlantis, Camille depicted the 'formal' economy as a separate domain where things are done 'right', and for which small businesses can be 'incubated' so that their upward mobility can be accelerated.

In the final months of my fieldwork, when the zone company received the funding for the construction of zone 1, this formalisation mandate gained extra urgency. On a phone call with Johan, and in email threads, DTIC officials explained that the funding was conditional on having a plan in place to include local SMMEs. The zone company officials set about writing up a strategic plan which began with a list of the various pieces of legislation that necessitated the inclusion of SMMEs: the 2011 National Development Plan; B-BBEE Construction Codes (which promote subcontracting to SMMEs); the 1996 National Small Enterprises Act; and the 2014 SEZ Act. The plan explained that a SMME database was being drawn up, to ensure that, when the time came, there would be a clear list of local SMMEs to contract. The officials defined 'local' according to a formalistic boundary corresponding to the municipal definition of the wider Atlantis area: Wards 29 and 32, or Atlantis, Mamre, Pella, and Witsand.

The officials worked tirelessly on this plan, adding inputs on a shared word document that was emailed to most of the staff for review (including myself), and even setting up a new standard weekly meeting to discuss 'SMME inclusion'. This plan included ramping up the SMME database registration drive. To collect registrations, the company set up stalls at community halls, and at local events. The Community Stakeholder Network was asked to help as well. The enterprise development database was made up of columns indicating whether or not small businesses were registered on the Central Supplier Database (CSD), Companies and Intellectual Property Commission (CIPC) registered, had B-BBEE certification, and were registered and tax compliant with the South African Revenue Service (SARS).

But the officials expressed awareness of the gaps between the script they were producing and the current reality on the ground. For one thing, the process of database registration was slow. As one official complained:

There is a big drive and big push for businesses to register on our database, to make sure all their compliance documents are there, and they are accounted for. It hasn't happened the way we planned. We thought we would have an influx of everyone registering. But we didn't. For whatever reason there is reluctance to register.

In one meeting, officials exchanged their frustrations. One exclaimed, 'They are supposed to come to us!'

Camille complained that many of the SMMEs the programme supported did 'not even classify as SMMEs'. 'They are emerging enterprises,' she said – often of no more than one person, earning a very low turnover of less than R10 000 a month, and, most frustratingly, 'they are not even registered!' This was confirmed when I was asked to draw up some statistical analysis of what proportion of the SMMEs on the database was 'fully compliant', and the results were, according to one of the officials, 'disappointing'.

Camille explained this to me as a greater symptom of the deficiency of local entrepreneurs, who did not, at present, map onto the official vision of business-savvy and professionalised agents of national transformation, but who needed to be 'assisted'. She said:

You ask once or twice or three times a year that people send their updated compliance documents. And it made me wonder, what is the problem with people? And I've realised that some of them are not tech savvy.

The officials lamented that SMMEs in the 'informal sector' rather rely on 'trust and word of mouth'. Moreover, they reported that business owners complained that getting their compliance documents was expensive and took a lot of time and effort (see also Hull, 2012). Camille sighed:

It's one thing to know you must register a business, another to know you must pay for CIPC fees every year to stay registered.

Another official explained that this was a reason why, until now, existing industrialists in Atlantis had not been contracting local SMMEs, and why the municipality itself struggled to do so. They said:

They say there are no local businesses in Atlantis, but it's because they [the institutions] don't have a database and they [SMMEs] aren't compliant.

Officials also argued that people were 'scared to fill out documents', implying a lack of trust in formal institutions to protect their interests.

The frustrations expressed by officials reveal an acute awareness that formal procedure does not carry authority on its own. Compliance could not simply be demanded; it had to be coaxed, assisted, and sometimes actively facilitated. Camille said, 'It is our duty to help them see the benefits.' I was asked to draft an official call for service providers to assist with this compliance. Camille explained that, although 'actually sitting down with people and helping them become compliant' was not officially one of her KPIs, it had quickly come to take up most of her time. She elaborated:

That is when we decided, no man, come to the office and we will assist you. Let's see what we can do for you guys. We are receiving documents from SMMEs and they come to the office to hand in documents and print for those who don't have facilities, and we help them. So hopefully we will have a better-looking database soon.

So, the company officials attempt to advance formality. At one level they imbue official logics with the status of truth, and structure self-understandings, career ambitions, and values according to their premises. At the same time though,

officials recognise the limited reach and authority of formal process and try to address this. But officials do not work alone. During my fieldwork, even as the officials complained about entrepreneurs' reluctance to formalise, they acknowledged that others had invested heavily in the process. Some attended multiple programmes, regularly narrating their 'business journeys' to staff. Others actively assisted with the registration drive itself. Formalisation, then, is a collective endeavour. In what follows, I examine why and how certain entrepreneurs embraced and promoted official rules in Atlantis, and what this reveals about the nature of SMME formalisation in a setting where market inclusion remains uncertain.



Figure 20: Atlantis SEZ SMME database registration drive (photograph taken by this author)

‘Your database is terrible’: Residents advance formalisation

At a community stakeholder meeting when the officials shared news of their database registration drive in the lead up to the construction, one entrepreneur said:

Your SMME drive is pathetic! It is not well attended. Our business forums can help you fill up that database. We can create a construction-based consortium. With plumbers, tilers, etc. We can provide that database to the ASEZ.

Following this suggestion, the zone company held another meeting to accept nominations (and self-nominations) for what they called an ‘Infrastructure Working Group’, to help advise with the process of SMME inclusion.¹⁰¹ Eight local business owners were elected to the forum. An official said excitedly, ‘These are difficult guys in the community, but it is what it is. It’s good. They will add value. They will help us.’

Erik Bähre (2012) describes how formalisation is extended in the micro-credit sector. He argues that insurance companies rely on hired brokers’ social networks to expand their reach into the otherwise impenetrable market of the informally employed. In this case, the zone company relied on (unremunerated – see also Chapter 4) entrepreneurs in Atlantis as intermediaries to advance their formalisation agenda. But how and why did these entrepreneurs do so?

This group met with the zone company on a weekly basis in the office, to go through the strategic plan for SMME inclusion, line by line, as it was projected onto a screen in the front of the room. They insisted that the zone company speed up its assistance with compliance and commended the company for setting up various workshops on financial management, joint ventures, and service level agreements, among other themes, all essential to make local businesses more competitive and ‘formal’ for the upcoming construction.

¹⁰¹ Officials insisted a new community forum was necessary, since they recognised the Community Stakeholder Network itself did not have the popularity to help secure support for the SMME drive on its own (see Chapter 4).

At one level, echoing the official rationale, the entrepreneurs expressed wanting to be incorporated, on a meritocratic basis, into formal markets. They talked about the need for Atlantis SMMEs to learn professionalism and learn ‘how to compete with the big boys’, as someone put it. Someone else said, ‘How are we gonna incubate to compete in the corporate world?’ They launched their own database registration drive to promote SMME formalisation and often spoke about not wanting people to ‘miss out because they are not compliant’. They cast registration and compliance as a duty of self-enterprising and self-reliant individuals, as I will demonstrate further in a moment.

But for all this talk of meritocratic, competitive procedure and standardised regulation, the entrepreneurs pursued formality for another set of reasons as well. Recognising that the zone company, like other public institutions, was mandated to allocate ‘local’ SMMEs a portion of the tender, they saw formalisation as a route to securing their own entitlements. As described in the opening vignette, this was seen as a moment of opportunity to access opportunities that were rightfully ‘theirs’. In meetings with the company, many insisted that ‘thirty per cent is only the minimum!’ and called on the company to allocate an even higher percentage of the tender to local SMMEs. This was in a setting where many suspected that existing regulations on SMME procurement might be ignored, or unevenly implemented, in practice. Someone said, ‘Most of the time here comes the project and our people will only be labourers. We only get the crumbs.’ Here, support for formalisation was motivated by a fear of being excluded, despite national regulations meant to guard against this.

Moreover, while the company officials insisted that their database was designed specifically to capture all ‘local’ SMMEs – from Ward 29 and 32, as per their other programmes aiming to include local people – many suspected that the definition of ‘local’ might be contorted to exclude them. This resonates with Scully

and Moyo's (2022) argument that construction has become a site where many poor Black South Africans not only expect, but proactively demand, to be incorporated, either as labourers, or as subcontracted SMMEs. But, although it has become the norm to consult with and hire 'local community', Scully and Moyo argue that the meanings of this are often contested. They explain that ward boundaries often do not overlap with popular understandings of neighbourhood or community boundaries.

Beyond the implementation of established formal rules, many shared a sense that formal process might not be upheld on the other end. Lying behind commitments to formalisation was a profound concern with the possibility of the total breakdown of ordered process if ordinary people decided not to follow the rules. This concern reflected national trends: media and grey literature document the rise of a so-called 'construction mafia'. This group is said to have emerged in Kwa-Zulu Natal (KZN) and is reported to use violent tactics (like wildcat shutdowns of projects, or tactics like blocking roads with stones and burning tyres) to disrupt construction sites. They are said to demand thirty per cent of the value of the tender without completing any of the work (see for example Carte Blanche, 2020; Groenendaal, 2023; Irish-Qhobosheane, 2022). This kind of violence, like other prevalent forms of violence in the country, can be analysed as a struggle over the meaning and content of citizenship entitlements in post-apartheid South Africa (von Holdt, 2013; von Holdt et al., 2011).

In Atlantis, amidst uncertainty over how the formal incorporation of SMMEs might play out in practice, formality was mobilised strategically. Beyond encouraging the wider population to register and become compliant, many hoped that established rules and procedures could safeguard their own entitlements to a share of the work. But how they engaged with formal process and rules was shaped by the prospect that rules might be unevenly implemented – or bypassed altogether.

The following sections examine two contrasting yet overlapping approaches to SMME formalisation. Through the cases of Emanuelle and Karabo, I show how entrepreneurs mobilised formal rules in different ways – sometimes seeking to fortify them, sometimes to adapt them, and at times to supplement them with unsanctioned repertoires of claim-making. Together, these cases demonstrate how formality is advanced strategically in a setting where people are aware of the potential fragility of formal economic rules and process.

Emanuelle: Formalising 'local' entitlements

Emanuelle, a self-identifying Coloured woman in her fifties, was an entrepreneur from Atlantis who worked to advance the company's formalisation agenda. Emanuelle grew up in Atlantis but left to look for work closer to Cape Town upon a divorce, before returning to care for a sick sibling who was battling a drug addiction. She described to me her 'life's mission' in terms that aligned closely with officials' own: to find 'specific methodologies for empowerment in Atlantis'.

She performed an identity of business-savvy professionalism and emphasised the importance of formal procedure and business compliance. As the chair of the Local Business Chamber, the preeminent business forum in Atlantis according to her, she described herself as 'the CEO of SMMEs'.¹⁰² She was always polite and unwavering about proper procedure: if she was late to a meeting, she would phone or email ahead of time, and she would complain if meetings ran over time, or skipped items on the agenda. She wore a black blazer to match her always newly-died, jet-black bob. She often had black painted nails to match, which she would tap on the

¹⁰² I have changed the names of the business forums to further preserve anonymity.

table if she was not making notes in her notepad which accompanied her to every occasion. She told me:

Business is about ethos. Aesthetics. How you conduct yourself as a person in public and private. And the narrative that you drive in business. And the position you take on a subject and how and when you express it. That it's not inappropriate.

Alongside proper 'ethos' and 'aesthetics' she emphasised the importance of compliance. She claimed her mission was to encourage people to register on the database, so that they would not miss out, telling people:

Now you must ensure you are fully compliant and competitive. You should have started already but it's not too late. If you want to partake it starts now.

Beyond trying to convince others about the merits of formalisation, she leveraged meetings with the company, and with the other entrepreneurs in the Infrastructure Working Group, as an opportunity to advance her own views on business and formality – even calling for everyone to 'speak the same language'. In one meeting she tried to encourage people to take up her own views by insisting that it was important that they 'all start to use the same narrative and take the same attitudes going forward'. Her influence was evidenced when she was the one chosen by the group to represent them in a wider community stakeholder meeting with other Atlantis residents. She said to me:

As you know Julia, as you must have seen, me and my business partner have been giving the most useful insights in the IWG (Infrastructure Working Group) with regards to business.

Beyond meetings, she spent a lot of time in the office, organising 'one-on-ones' with Camille and even the CEO.

These efforts to influence formal process were driven by Emanuelle's own particular formalisation agenda. She pushed to institutionalise an additional set of rules that would specify who should be given privileged access to the upcoming construction work. In the first meeting she said to the officials:

You need to figure out how best to serve and equip the people of Atlantis to give them an advantage. It sounds unfair, but it's what we need. We have experienced marginalisation, and this is a way to even the playing field. Hopefully there won't be thousands of people bussed in from Cape Town.

Special requests to prioritise 'the people of Atlantis' included financial assistance, and 'exempting' local SMMEs from certain Construction Industry Development Board (CIDB) grading requirements (gradings based on prior experience, which many local SMMEs did not have). Emanuelle and others further called for the creation of other protocol to ensure that opportunities only went to 'locals' and not 'foreigners'. During meetings with the zone company, she and others suggested all manner of mechanisms that the company should use to evaluate whether someone was 'local' or not: various kinds of proof of address, and, following speculations that people 'from outside' would try to fake these, letters from the local ward councillor attesting to how long someone had lived in Atlantis.

Emanuelle and others insisted on additional special protocol to give those from Atlantis an 'advantage', to be institutionalised by the company in addition to its existing national legislative mandate to include 'local' SMMEs. This insistence was strategic in a setting where many feared that existing procurement legislation mandating the inclusion of 'Black owned' SMMEs might exclude them. Many suspected that either the rules would not be followed to the letter, or else that others beyond the state might neglect these rules, leading to a breakdown of formal process entirely.

Despite its professed commitments to favour Wards 29 and 32, many in Atlantis feared that the company would in practice prioritise the SMMEs of African people over Coloured people. It was popularly believed that the few employers in the wider industrial area favoured 'Black people' (African people), but, more than this, that the state also ultimately favoured them. This latter suspicion was often justified via the fact that a public housing scheme had been launched in Witsand in 2004, while Atlantis people on the list for housing had been waiting for decades longer. More generally, many were sceptical of what they perceived as 'Black majority rule', as explained also in Chapter 4.

Not only did Emanuelle worry that African people might be informally favoured; she and others depicted Africans, according to a set of racist stereotypes, as more likely to demand a share of the resources on an informal basis, bypassing formal process. I often heard Atlantis residents characterising Coloured people as 'passive' compared to African people who 'toyi toyi' (a protest dance) and use other 'violent' means to make demands of 'their government'. In contrast to Coloured people who were portrayed as trying and failing to compete on merit, African people were portrayed by many as benefitting on the basis of their race, and the privileged forms of membership this offered them in the post-apartheid polity.

While many expressed abhorrence for any kind of racial stereotyping, it was often the case that people depicted stereotypes as kind of common-sense fact (as something 'it boils down to', in someone's words), even if they recognised this was politically impolite to acknowledge. These kinds of narratives bear the imprint of apartheid era 'common sense' about race as a set of inherent biological and social traits (Posel, 2001). More specifically they bear traces of a longstanding colonial and apartheid discourse which rationalised Coloured people in the Western Cape as

physically weaker than Africans, who were cast as infiltrating their areas and taking their jobs (see Chapter 1). As someone put it to me:

Sometimes we feel in Atlantis at the moment that government is preferring the Black [African] people. But Black [African] people are still as marginalised as Coloured people! The only difference is they take the opportunity! I sit and wait! They say, “I am going to take it!”

These kinds of narratives do not just reproduce racial prejudice; they give moral force to the claim that formal process must be supplemented if it is to protect ‘local’ entitlements. A resident even drew up a ‘Community Inclusion Protocol’ document which insisted that leaders in Witsand had to manage any ‘outsiders’ (lumping all Africans around the country together). While their protocol was not popular amongst the Infrastructure Working Group, who insisted that one should not ‘separate’ between the people of Witsand and those of Atlantis proper, the resident went on to defend the idea of their protocol in one of the meetings:

People wake up and smell the coffee. Our only means for survival is to protect our local communities from infiltration and displacement through our own community protocol or to be left to the mercy of a Black majority where you will be overruled and outnumbered or just go with the flow, because your voice and aspirations do not count.

Here, ideas about ‘infiltration’ give expression to a broader anxiety about the fragility of formal process, and the sense that it might be side-stepped or rejected altogether. While Emanuelle herself rejected this protocol (both its ‘informality’ and the racial stereotyping it entailed), she did worry about what she described as ‘a lawless approach coming to Atlantis’. It was not just Africans who were suspected of representing this approach. Emanuelle had a particular gripe with another business owner in Atlantis (who was also Coloured), whom she characterised as emblematic of

a 'lawless' approach. On one occasion Emanuelle forwarded to the CEO of the zone company, and to me, a set of WhatsApp voice notes that had been doing the rounds. She said that this particular entrepreneur had been recruiting 'the unemployed people of Atlantis' to occupy a construction site; so that he could bribe the contractor to be allocated the mandated thirty per cent share, on condition of helping to remove the invaders.

On another occasion, she even brought a formal letter of complaint against this person. She described them to me disparagingly:

He doesn't conduct himself professionally – you make appointments with him for meetings and he doesn't show. If then eventually he will arrive at a meeting it will be on his own time. If we meet at his venue then he carries on with what he is busy with, entertaining other people, instead of sticking to our agenda.

She insisted on the company formally implementing extensive security measures to keep 'foreigners' (those not from the wider Atlantis area as defined by the company) out, and to prevent local actors from bypassing formal procedure to forcefully claim a share of the resources – behaviour she described as criminal. She said passionately in a Working Group meeting with the company:

Let's put measures in place to safeguard Atlantis. Things like how to report extortion. A hot line, a special task team, or some reporting authority. Let's identify suspects who behave in a criminal way. Let's rather be proactive than waiting for it to happen. Let's build it into all our rules or tender requirements clearly. Let's put security systems in place.

On the one hand, we see how entrepreneurs shore up the authority of the formal script: encouraging database registration and compliance as evidence of professionalism and proactivity. On the other hand, they seek to extend and adapt

that script. Demands for stricter proof of locality, exemptions from grading requirements, or preferential treatment for Atlantis residents do not reject formality. They aim to sediment additional criteria for entitlement within it – to crystallise definitions of entitlement into institutional rule and practice.

Emanuelle’s performance of professionalism as the ‘CEO of SMMEs’, alongside her insistence on special protocol and security measures, exemplifies this. Her commitment to compliance is inseparable from an anxiety that existing rules may not be enforced or may be captured or even totally bypassed by others. She advances formalisation here not because of faith in the effectiveness of formal rules and process, but rather in anticipation of their possible failure.

Karabo: Defending formal citizenship entitlements

From the Tsolo-Maclear region of the Transkei, Karabo used to come to the Western Cape on holidays with his family because his aunt had a waged job there. In 1998, he decided to join her, in hope of finding his own job. He said, ‘I just came looking for employment like anyone.’ He initially moved to the nearby settlement of Dunoon before getting a job for a Turkish manufacturing company in the old industrial area of Atlantis, at which time he and his wife moved to Witsand. Sitting together in the small building he used as a meeting room in Witsand, he explained:

I was always keen to start my business. I am an entrepreneur. *Ja*. So I didn’t work there [at the factory] much. Only a few months.

Karabo narrated his experience as an entrepreneur to me as one of personal growth and transformation, which, despite its challenges, he saw as a model for other South Africans. He and his wife had initially started selling fruits and vegetables from

their shack in Witsand, and eventually they were able to set up a market stall. But, after some time, he had fallen ill, and their business had suffered. In the interim he had helped found a South African National Civics Organisation (SANCO) group, to advocate for basic services for the informal settlement. It was through this political activism that he had seen his next business opportunity. He explained how he had set up a small construction business to tender for opportunities to build some of the RDP (Reconstruction and Development Programme; the name of the policy that provided state housing) houses that were developed as part of the wider service delivery programme.

He explained he had started a business forum in 2018, called Ishishini ('Business' in Xhosa, his first language), to help others understand business and to become compliant to trade in the formal sector:

We said, "Let's make a business forum in our community, let's organise them, those that have got a business mind, those that are trying to make businesses." We can assist them on how to make sure their business is legalised or...I forgot now this word, oh, to become compliant, yes!

Describing this rationale, he promoted the ideals of self-reliance and independence, as part of a wider philosophy wherein dependence on the state was seen as problematic. He went on:

Let's make our people understand. We cannot live on grants, all of us, no! Let's create work! Let's be entrepreneurs! Let's work on how to survive, how can we make money. We cannot just sit and then wait for the government; it doesn't work like that. Because you get the house then you sell it and then what's going to happen? If you don't have a house you can make a spaza shop and sell something. You know! Encourage our people. That's why we as a business forum are fighting for those things.

Like Emanuelle, Karabo championed compliance among his constituents as part of proper business practice. But where Emanuelle's emphasis on due process came to centre on advancing a set of subnational or company rules, Karabo insisted on following national legislation. He argued that, at the end of the day, participation in the construction project should depend on who was compliant and competitive according to national tender legislation. He offered himself as a role model: 'I myself am fully compliant and I will tender.' He insisted:

We want to make it too tight for outside people not to get involved you see. I don't see why we are taking so long and debating who must take part, who mustn't take part. We must just use the legal way of doing things.

In the long conversations about the various bureaucratic procedures that could be put in place to limit who could partake in the construction, Karabo would sigh, or shake his head. At one point he dismissed one of Emanuelle's comments about the need for stringent requirements on SMME inclusion as 'bringing petty issues'. Sitting around the board room table, in denim jeans, a SANCO t-shirt, Puma sneakers, and a characteristic beanie perched on top of his head, Karabo said, 'When we talk about "local" there are differences. I need clarity on "local".' He was making sure that 'local' pertained not just to people from Atlantis proper, to the exclusion of other areas like Mamre, Pella, and, pertinently, Witsand, where he himself was based. He said the sub council also included Dunoon in a 'local' footprint and asked why they were not also included.

He explained his view to me in private conversation. As the zone company was a part of the government it should abide by its definitions, including of national membership. He said:

We forget something – the ASEZ is not from the province, it's from national government. The national government is not excluding anyone. We are making it too tight now. I don't see why we take so long to discuss things that are unnecessary.

This was based on a set of ideals about collective national belonging and solidarity.

He continued:

Our mindset must be open and how, because Atlantis is not meant only for residents of Atlantis. Atlantis has this opportunity of this SEZ, meaning that all over the country, people will flow into Atlantis. They are South Africans, regardless of where they stay. Your child is my child.

He explained that his own business forum was founded on this basis:

Our forum caters to everyone. We are not excluding anyone because we are being guided by the South African Constitution.

But Karabo's arguments about abiding by national legislation worked alongside another set of views he held, wherein governmental procedure might be insufficient to protect citizenship entitlements. He advanced a parallel set of ideas about the necessity of extra-legal forms of claim making in a political context where the government ignores those who 'ask nicely', in other words, those who abide too closely by formal rules alone. He said:

With our government, this government which we are under, if you ask nicely, there is nothing gonna happen. It's like a small child, you go like this –

He smacked his own arm as if disciplining a child, continuing, rolling his r's very strongly to emphasise his point:

And then you must leave. Until you guys who come and then make a *strong* noise, a *strong* visibility, make a *strong* case, that's when they are going to hear you. You find you have to block the road, block whatever.

Karabo explained that he had learnt the proper means to secure entitlements from the state through his work with SANCO in helping Witsand secure basic services and housing. He told me at length about how he had learnt an 'imbizo' style of leadership, wherein he and the other leaders of the business forum would meet in private before every meeting with their members, or with the zone company, to ensure they could work through differences and emerge 'more united'. This, he suggested, was crucial for the kinds of demands they needed to communicate with the government. For example, he told me that during the COVID-19 crisis, when local businesses were suffering because they were not allowed to travel to trade, his forum had gone to 'challenge the authorities to get our members permission to buy stock, trade, and work freely'. He characterised this kind of political mobilisation, and ability to 'challenge' the state, as a constituent part of doing business:

That is when we know we are on the right track because in order for you to be a successful businessman you must know how to manage all of these things.

By contrast, he described those from Atlantis as overly individualistic and atomised 'in silos', suggesting that this, not the strength or weakness of bureaucratic mechanisms, would be the reason they might lose out on the upcoming opportunities. As much as many Coloured residents drew on essentialised conceptions of racial difference, Karabo did as well. He explained:

Now we Black people, African people, we fight, we've got backbone. When we want something, we fight for it. If we want something, we know we have got rights, we

come together, we are so united. We say, “Let’s go and ace whatever and go and stop it.” That is the difference between those ones and us. Our voice is heard more than the other people. You can’t challenge the government if you are in silos.

Where Karabo’s ethos of ‘making noise’ and ‘being heard more than others’ was perceived as problematic and entitled by Emanuelle, and as a threat to proper procedure, Karabo saw it as a pragmatic means through which to access available public resources and overcome state neglect. He insisted this was nothing like ‘construction mafia’ tactics, with all the pejorative connotations as ‘criminal’. He complained of all the rumours flying around in Atlantis about a coming ‘construction mafia’: ‘They are taking something that is happening in KZN and bringing it here to Atlantis. They are taking a story!’ He explained that, by contrast to the much derided ‘mafia’, his group was morally justified. In his view, his group would be ‘provoked’ to ‘push to ask questions’ about certain sites when there was a lack of information, or when entitlements were ignored. He described this as being ‘pushed to demand our rights’.

Yet Karabo did not advocate unrestrained disruption. His endorsement of ‘making noise’ was tied to a strong emphasis on unity and disciplined leadership. In fact, in Karabo’s telling, this kind of collective mobilisation was necessary for ordered process itself. In his view, atomised, uncoordinated action – from communities acting ‘in silos’ without shared direction – would more disruptive, and even ‘dangerous’. Evoking the image of ‘stabbing’, and therefore of prevalent gang violence among Coloured residents, he said:

We are trying from our side to say, “Guys come together, look at us how we are doing things.” They are supposed to have leadership like us in Witsand. Not alone, alone [sic]. Those ones in Atlantis are broken down into a thousand pieces but if you take that window you can see through it, but when you break that window it’s one

thousand pieces. Now when it's one thousand pieces it's very dangerous! There is stabbing! You're gonna get some injuries.

Karabo cast himself, at one level, as a champion of business empowerment through economic formalisation and strict adherence to national legislation. For him, compliance was not simply good business practice; it was a claim to entitlements based on membership in a national constitutional order. Yet his commitment to legality did not rest on faith that bureaucratic procedure would deliver entitlements on its own. His experience through SANCO had taught him that 'asking nicely' was often ineffective. Protest, collective mobilisation, and 'making noise' were, for Karabo, mechanisms through which formal rights could be activated when bureaucratic channels resulted in neglect.

In this respect, Karabo's approach mirrors Emanuelle's in specific ways. Both feared the breakdown of a collective commitment to ordered process. Emanuelle sought to address this by tightening company rules, or else making exemptions from them; Karabo by cultivating disciplined collective mobilisation. Each recognised that national regulations alone might fail. Each therefore supplemented these – one by embedding protections of entitlement within rule, the other by advocating the organised force necessary to defend those entitlements in practice. Formalisation here is sustained through this shared anticipation of its fragility.

In the final section, I return to the officials. In a setting where the promise of formalised economic inclusion has long remained unfulfilled, and where the authority of formal rules cannot be taken for granted, formality is advanced less for its regulatory functions than through securing socialised recognition that distribution is rule-bound.

Formalising SMMEs to secure collective recognition of a rule-bound distributional regime

Back in the company offices, Johan said to the team:

When this kind of money flows into Atlantis, it's going to make grasshoppers jump. It needs to be very carefully managed. Trust me, it's very intricate work. Right from the start I said that including SMMEs is non-negotiable. It's tedious, it's a lot of work, but it's a must do.

Johan's metaphor captured the understanding amongst company officials that large inflows of public funds into Atlantis, a setting with few other opportunities, would attract attention. Formal inclusion of SMMEs was not only a legal requirement but a means of managing anticipated claims on this money.

As already explained, the SMME database, and efforts to help local SMMEs become compliant, were mandated by the DTIC, as a condition for its funding, and by South African procurement and other legislation. Formalisation of this kind is officially meant to bring the previously excluded Black population into the ambit of a single regulatory framework to catalyse upward social mobility and even equality, through business. But there were other underlying reasons that zone company officials felt that this was a 'must do'. Contrary to their discourses about the functionality of formalisation and the database, in Atlantis officials tacitly understood that these in themselves were insufficient to ensure consensus around distribution. In fact, the officials expressed on multiple occasions that they would not rely heavily on the database when it came to contracting local SMMEs. In a meeting about the database, Camille's comments were instructive. She said:

We will do whatever it takes to reach as many SMMEs as possible, even if we have to phone them, SMS [text] them, go get them, go to them, hand out 10 000 flyers, whatever, we will do it. We will share the adverts with the CSN, in the local press. We

want this to be as wide as possible, so no one comes back and says they didn't know, that they weren't consulted.

She went on:

We obviously won't actually get to *everyone* because we are not God, but they will know we tried.

These comments reveal that for Camille, advertising the database as widely as possible in Atlantis was not, as one might expect, about rendering local SMMEs formally legible, but rather about communicating a message to Atlantis residents: that the zone company had 'tried' to consult with everyone. Here, the database appears less as an instrumental and effective mechanism managing the process of allocating opportunities than as publicised evidence of procedural fairness. Its importance lay in demonstrating officials' effort and transparency – in producing a defensible record that opportunities were being systematically shared according to formalised procedure.

Just as the regulatory capacity of the database was limited, efforts to render the population compliant may also have fallen short of official ambitions. During a weekly meeting about the SMME inclusion plan, the officials debated whether there would be enough compliant SMMEs in Atlantis to take up the work packages set out for them. They deliberated on whether and how they should open the tender to SMMEs from outside Atlantis in the case that they could not recruit locally. Someone said of this, with an air of panic:

I foresee huge problems with this from the community. They are not going to be happy with "outsiders" working on this project. If we don't get this database right, we will have protests, and the main architect will have a gun to his head.

Here officials draw on age-old stereotypes about unemployed people as potential sources of violence and disruption of the social order (see Chapter 1, and also Dawson, 2025). While such discourses are often ‘alarmist’ (as my interlocuter below said himself), they draw on real trends in South Africa and elsewhere, of violent forms of claim-making, particularly on construction sites, as in the case of the infamous construction mafia described earlier.

In this setting, officials recognised that the authority of formal procedure depended on community recognition. They shared articles and YouTube videos via email and WhatsApp about other projects around the country being held up or cancelled altogether, as a result of protests and other forms of violent disruption. This had further consequences for job security in the company. Camille told me:

I don’t want to get fired next year when the SMMEs start burning roads because they feel they have been excluded.

Alongside these efforts at inclusion, officials also planned for the possibility that ordered process would need to be secured through force. Johan and some of the other executives arranged to meet with a local police commander to discuss a ‘security plan’ for the construction. In the early morning meeting, Johan opened by cutting straight to the chase as usual:

The benefits from this construction need to go to *this* area, not to people from Limpopo, or anywhere else. If the guys think we are bringing guys from outside they won’t be happy. How do we prevent that? R89 million in this part of the world is big. What’s your advice?

At this the local police commander laughed, and said immediately, ‘Consult everybody.’ He qualified by adding:

If you don't start at the beginning and include everyone, it only takes one person to light a fire. Let's not approach this like a normal White man's contract... We have to anticipate people coming saying "*Waar's my stukkie* [Where's my piece/share]?" Infighting in Atlantis is like crayfish in a pot. When one is about to get out the others pull him down. Maybe in twelve months you will call me alarmist but that's fine.

To 'include everyone' was to neutralise potential claims before they escalated into disruption. Johan, the other company officials in the room, and the police commanders talked at length about the risks of disruption by the community (talking about Atlantis 'youth' and 'gangs') as well as the 'construction mafia' hailing from further afield. They devised an emergency contact list and discussed various procedures they might need to implement. At one point in this conversation Johan said jokingly, gesturing at himself and making light of his reputation for being dogged and assertive – 'You get White gangsters too. Look at me.' – before continuing more seriously:

But I think we've put in place a fantastic system to manage risks. No doubt there are people who will do their utmost best to disrupt the process if things don't go their way. But we have built up the... "social capital", or whatever you call it. And we have our SMME database. That will hopefully save us.

In this setting, the SMME database functions less as a self-sufficient regulatory tool than as a support for rules whose authority depend on collective recognition – and, if necessary, on force. In another conversation, the officials reassured each other of their 'social capital' by listing the names of key intermediaries (Emanuelle and Karabo among them), who they hoped would help keep the process 'on track'. Camille said that because these entrepreneurs had been

so thoroughly involved in devising the SMME inclusion plan, and in sharing information with their constituencies, they were ‘part of the team’.

To formalise enterprise empowerment in a setting of chronic exclusion is to attempt to ensure that public resources are seen to be allocated through recognisable rules rather than through informal demands. To achieve this requires continual public signalling, the mobilisation of intermediaries, and the cultivation of shared stories about fairness and procedure.

When the officials talked about being ‘saved’ though, they were not just referring to the successful delivery of a planned construction project. Formal process, and the maintenance of collective support for formal process, were also treated as key to the continuation of the SEZ more broadly. Johan said to the team of this overarching and longer-term mission:

There have been different organisations working on this for 11 years to get this process where it is. It’s not going to help anyone if we have riots because the community isn’t happy. It’s not going to help the community, and it’s not going to help the SEZ.

To which another official responded:

If this process doesn’t run smoothly, we will scare away investors and jobs. Without jobs, none of this will matter.

These remarks make clear that SMME formalisation in this setting was not only about ensuring that the construction ran smoothly; it was about preserving the SEZ’s claim to be a credible site of future investment and employment creation. The maintenance – or at least the credible performance – of a rule-bound order thus becomes another condition on which the plausibility of future market inclusion through the zone rests.

Conclusion

This chapter has examined what is entailed in practice in SMME formalisation, and how it is sustained in a setting where the promises of formalised economic incorporation have remained uneven. SMME formalisation is officially about incorporating small businesses into the so-called ‘formal’ economy as a form of business empowerment, indexed to values of productivity and self-reliance. In practice, this chapter has shown how, in the lead up to a publicly funded construction project, a rare opportunity in a remote and marginalised area, SMME formalisation is defined by struggles over the distribution of public resources. Formality here is sustained by the aggregated efforts of different actors: as much by officials seeking to secure the credibility of rules in a contested distributive regime, as by entrepreneurs keen to gain a foothold in this regime, from which many feel excluded.

By tracing the work of officials and entrepreneurs to formalise SMMEs and SMME inclusion, the chapter has argued that formalisation is sustained neither by deep commitments to its official premises nor by faith in its practical effectiveness. Rather, it emerges through the aggregated efforts of actors who recognise the limited applicability and reliability of formal rules and processes. Officials are aware that formal rules and processes lack inherent authority and require active cultivation, the assistance of influential intermediaries and, at times, the threat of securitisation. Entrepreneurs, for their part, mobilise formal categories strategically: sometimes to fortify them, sometimes to adapt them, and sometimes to supplement them with extra-legal repertoires of claim-making.

In this sense, the primary efficacy of formality here lies less in the seamless functioning of its rules and procedures than through the work of different actors in

securing social recognition for its scripts. In Atlantis, the database, compliance drives, consultation meetings, and inclusion plans did not simply regulate distribution; they rendered it recognisable as rule-bound.

In practice, the SEZ emerges less as a site of expanding private markets than as a terrain of institutionally-mediated recognition of entitlements and distribution of public resources. In this case, entrepreneurial participation took the form of doing business with government. Public personnel, public funds, administrative rules, and negotiated procedures structured everyday struggles to have entitlements recognised, and the prospect of securing livelihoods. Yet these practices came to shore up official claims, described throughout this thesis, that the zone might still succeed as a site of market inclusion. Indeed, at the time of writing, the construction of zone 1 had been completed, without much 'disruption' as an official put it to me, and the zone company continues to remain active in its mission.

Conclusion

Sustaining the plausibility of market participation

“The Messiah will come only when he is no longer necessary, he will come only one day after his arrival, he will not come on the last day, but on the last day of all.”
Franz Kafka’s (1991) *The Third Notebook* (cited in Pelkmans, 2013, p.28)

It is nearing the end of my fieldwork in Atlantis. Summer has come and gone and is on its way back again. I have become familiar with the everyday practices and routines that animate the SEZ. Today, I have been granted permission to attend an event that marks a significant occasion in that usual rhythm: the zone company’s board meeting. In attendance are representatives from the company’s majority and minority shareholders – from the Western Cape government and the City – as well as from the DTIC, the national governmental department responsible for the SEZ Act. I sidle into the company’s main board room to find Johan sitting at the head of the big conference room table, surrounded by the executives. Our esteemed guests are visible on the screen in front of the room. Johan has a massively thick file printed out in front of him, filled with the latest information on the zone’s activities and its success against stipulated performance criteria. He fingers through it before launching into his presentation for the board.

He begins with a slide featuring national investment statistics, saying, ‘It’s not looking good out there. We are falling back in Africa as an attractive destination.’ The meeting unfolds in a series of discussions about the company’s investment prospects and the board’s demands for more detailed reporting on these. The head of business development complains that National Treasury has continued to refuse to grant the

zone tax incentives as mandated in the SEZ Act, even after the company sent them a ‘strongly worded legal letter’. He insists:

We are a SEZ with no special according to [investors]. It could be a problem down the line if we are unable to demonstrate that moving to Atlantis is actually very cheap.

The officials discuss potentially expanding the ‘green tech’ category even further (see Chapter 3), to include non-manufacturing activities like warehouses, because of the expected likelihood of being able to attract such investment. Johan says, ‘Maybe I am desperate. I just want to get going.’ A City official responds:

I know we are trying to attract investment as quickly as possible, but we need to be very careful that it adds value and the community can see it’s creating jobs.

An official from the DTIC adds, in concurrence:

As much as there is a need to attract investment, we always need to go back to the rationale for the SEZ: to support industrialisation and to create jobs in the region.

That puts a pause to this topic for now. Despite the question of the viability of its investment prospects remaining unresolved, the conversation turns to the company’s achievements. The Chair of the board, an official from Western Cape’s DEDAT, the institution that funds all the company’s operational costs, says sternly, ‘In February you said you would meet all your targets and now we see that not all targets have been met.’ Johan replies: ‘We have achieved seventy-one per cent of our targets. We have reduced the number of targets that were not achieved.’ After some back and forth about the frequency of reporting, and the need for the board to stay up to date

on the ‘risks that are preventing targets from being met’, the DEDAT official concludes:

I think we are starting to tell a very good story and the narrative fits inside the performance review.

This thesis has been an account of how this zone has come to constitute the alleged beginnings of a ‘very good story’. Not quite the ‘success’ story of providing jobs and other market opportunities at scale, but neither is it a ‘failure’. This vignette shows that a key audience for this story is officials from other parts of government, particularly national and provincial government who are responsible for funding the zone company’s running costs, and infrastructure development. While not in attendance here, National Treasury officials are also significant. They were responsible for listing the zone company in the first place, and it is to them whom company officials’ appeals for further financial incentives for the SEZ are directed.

This points to the wider political and political economic backdrop that helps to constitute the ambiguous neither-success-nor-failure of an intervention like the Atlantis SEZ. One could have approached this study through a more direct focus on the national politics that play a role in allowing this zone with ambiguous outcomes to persist. This study would centre the contestations between the DTIC and National Treasury over industrial policy and the design of the SEZ Act itself; on Treasury’s critical reviews of the performance of zones; and on whether and how these might inflect political decisions about the continuation or termination of the policy. Such an approach could include a more detailed account of the fiscal allocations to provincial governments, and how these feature in provincial decisions about whether and how to continue funnelling money to SEZs with few tangible outcomes. Indeed, in a more recent conversation I had with one of the SEZ’s executives, he told me ‘the SEZ

model is effectively dead in its previous conception' and explained that neither of its existing funders could provide reliable sources of finance any longer, partly due to slimming fiscal allocations. Even so, it remains unclear whether these funding cuts would lead directly to SEZ termination. Even during my fieldwork, the company had started to explore alternative sources of funding through international donors and was even considering partnering with private sector developers to keep the project alive.

Taking an even wider-angled view, these political dynamics are themselves shaped by transformations in global political economic conditions. The question of how the unemployed, and more generally the indigent and destitute, are to be institutionally dealt with has had shifting political stakes through time. In nineteenth and twentieth century Europe, public and policy engagement with what came to be called the 'social question' resulted in extensive forms of social protection, culminating in the post-World War II welfare states of the Global North (Breman et al., 2019). But since the advent of so-called 'neoliberalism' in the 1970s, social policy across much of the world has come to be framed in terms of individuals' capacity for market participation. In this conjuncture, social policy aimed at addressing problems of poverty and unemployment is often subordinated to the imperatives of fiscal 'sustainability', ensuring national economic competitiveness, and attracting footloose global capital (Lin, Arnold and Nguyen, 2024; Nguyen, Rydstrom and Mao, 2024).

Post-apartheid South Africa in many ways exemplifies these global trends. Democracy was hard won at precisely the moment that the mid-twentieth century welfare state model was facing mounting strain. While its own welfare system, designed originally primarily to assist Whites, was rolled out and adapted to provide equal cover to the Black majority (Scully, 2019), the burden for dealing with heinous levels of inequality and unemployment continues to fall squarely on the success of

schemes claiming to catalyse participation in markets.¹⁰³ This helps to explain why the promise of a scheme like the Atlantis SEZ retains so much political significance, even as its outcomes remain uncertain.

Although this thesis focused on the specific setting of Atlantis, that setting has also provided a vantage point from which to explore broader dynamics of national politics and shifting global norms around how to address unemployment. I have done so all the way from my discussion of the historical context for labour market interventions described in Chapter 1; to the discussion of the struggles over the SEZ policy and the establishment of the ‘commercially viable’ company in Chapter 2; and further through setting out the contexts in which community participation, skills development, and enterprise development are presented as key ingredients in the inculcation of market participation as a widely accepted national agenda. Across the thesis, an ethnographic examination of the zone’s everyday operation, and of the generation of representations of its plausible success, has enabled me to explore how these wider processes have shaped this particular setting. This specific setting also affords insights about these processes in turn. Such an approach follows a longer tradition in anthropology and in ethnographies of Southern Africa (Epstein, 1958; Gluckman, 1940; Mitchell, 1956). The study of a single ‘situation’ ‘shows how wider processes... are refracted through, and transformed by, processes and events at one

¹⁰³ Post-apartheid South Africa boasts a relatively extensive social welfare system compared to other middle-income countries in the Global South. That said, this system remains politically constrained by, on the one hand, public commitments to fiscal prudence, and on the other, deep-rooted ideological commitments to the value of work and industriousness (see also Ferguson, 2015; Fouksman and Dawson, 2024). Beyond state-funded services, the only assistance for able-bodied, working-age people has been the Unemployment Insurance Fund (UIF), and public works programmes, both limited in terms of whom they support (see also Scully, 2019). This changed more recently during the COVID-19 crisis with the introduction of the Social Relief of Distress (SRD) grant, which is offered also to working-aged people. This grant, however, has remained contested in and beyond government. While President Ramaphosa announced in the 2026 State of the Nation Address that this grant would be extended, various interlocutors in government have reported to me that the National Treasury is continuing to lobby for it to be transformed into a ‘job-seekers grant’, conditional on evidence that the recipient is ‘actively searching for work’. This underlines the continuing salience of market participation in conditioning public assistance for the unemployed.

particular site' (Bolt, 2012, p.23). This has been a study of how a single scheme, launched in the name of market participation but struggling to deliver this, is reproduced in practice by those directly involved.

The case of the Atlantis SEZ provides a window onto how populations rendered 'surplus' in capitalism are continually encouraged to see expanded possibilities for formal economic incorporation despite their enduring precarity and marginalisation. This occurs as the unemployed are actively recruited to partake in schemes that promise – but repeatedly postpone – the delivery of meaningful economic opportunities. This is not because of some inevitable 'logic of capital', and neither does it occur without the self-aware and critical participation of a whole range of actors. The contribution of this study is in the detailed ethnographic picture it offers of the self-understandings, interests, relationships, and practices through which this intervention – informed by a legacy of failed state promises – is reproduced at the uncertain juncture between 'success' and 'failure'.

Across the thesis I have shown how the Atlantis SEZ is sustained through the work of diverse actors who produce its plausibility when both success and failure are possible. This work entails administrative and bureaucratic activity, writing reports, constructing 'expert' calculations, participating in and documenting events, and the diverse forms of effort entailed in persuading oneself and others of the merits of taking part. The thesis demonstrated that the way actors participate in such activities is conditional on their vastly different authority and circumstances, and in the same stroke, on what they stand to gain or lose in the contexts of their own lives and careers. Ultimately, the zone's persistence can be understood as the collective result of differently positioned actors' work to secure livelihoods, security, status, and recognition precisely when outcomes are unknown.

In concluding, I will briefly summarise the argument as it unfolded across the thesis. I began by situating the Atlantis SEZ within a longer history wherein work and economic productivity have been deemed the primary routes out of structural poverty and unemployment. It is the most recent in a succession of institutionalised attempts to address unemployment through labour markets in the region – attempts that repeatedly fell short on their own terms. Chapter 1 demonstrated how ‘Coloured’ unemployment came to be understood as a ‘problem’ demanding political and ‘expert’ intervention over time. Across this history, Coloured populations came to occupy a ‘middling’ position within colonial and apartheid racial hierarchies. This position was politically enforced in the labour market and became the lens through which their chronic unemployment was interpreted: as the condition of being ‘outcompeted’ by Whites from above and Africans from below. Within this formation, racially structured labour markets rendered Coloured populations structurally surplus, as their intermediate status was simultaneously enforced and eroded, and as successive interventions claiming to remedy this condition repeatedly failed to do so. Labour bureaus, large-scale public works programmes, and the apartheid regime’s industrial decentralisation scheme all sought to put Coloured people to work, yet were all ultimately declared failures on their own terms. This longer trajectory helps to make sense of contemporary unemployment in Atlantis. The ‘problem’ the green zone now purports to solve is a consequence, at least in part, of the history of racial capitalism.

The thesis then turned directly to the post-apartheid SEZ, exploring how it is shaped in the political and political economic circumstances of the post-apartheid era, and according to revised forms of expertise. Chapter 2 traced the wider political environment in which the SEZ concept, and the zone company itself, were established, conditioned by fiscal conservatism, and a pervasive and ideological

scepticism about the post-apartheid state's capacity to deliver on its mandate for 'development'. Amidst scepticism about the zone's potential failure, I argue that it is in the language, frameworks, and techniques of 'ethical business' that company officials find the resources to demonstrate the company's plausible success. The chapter went on to explore why officials work to demonstrate this success in these terms. I showed that in a context where institutional survival is far from assured, officials' own lives are entwined with evaluations of the project. Their job security, professional standing, sense of personal and moral purpose, and at times even personal lives, are bound up with how the project is judged. These cumulative personal stakes, structured through an institutionalised commitment to building an 'ethical business', make 'walking away' from the project, or even just deciding conclusively to view it as a 'failure', profoundly consequential. So, officials, for their own diverse reasons, work hard to make the zone a success, and failing meaningful outcomes, foreground its 'progress' as a socially responsible and commercially savvy institution that is at least *capable* of such success.

But official representations of zone plausibility are not produced by officials alone. Successive teams of consultants have constructed 'expert' projections of the zone's 'feasibility' and 'economic potential' as a green technology SEZ. These underwrote the official designation of the zone, and they are continually touted as evidence of its 'solid business case' – even as successive rounds of projections have not been borne out. Chapter 3 interrogated what goes into making consultant forecasts of 'success', and how past forecasts are justified when they do not materialise. It argued that it is not through technical calculation alone that consultants produce professional optimism. Rather, consultants' 'success' claims (and their claims about 'failure') cannot be separated from their own prospects. The evaluations they make about the zone are imbricated in how they navigate the

everyday dilemmas of remaining legitimate in a competitive development consulting industry: managing political and client expectations, the uncertainty of markets, and their own career trajectories. As one round of expert projections is unrealised, new consultants are hired, new projections and strategy plans are devised, and so the zone remains plausible – according to the ‘experts’.

The rest of the thesis investigated why ordinary Atlantis residents enrol in the SEZ – particularly through its community, skills, and enterprise programmes – and with what consequences for their own lives. It explored how residents engage with a dual orientation: at once expectant that the zone should and will provide them, as citizens, with market opportunities, and sceptical that it might just be another broken promise. Chapters 4, 5, and 6 explore the various understandings and processes through which residents’ doubtful engagements end up contributing to the reproduction of the institution, and through which their involvement is translated into documentary evidence and metrics of zone ‘progress’ in the absence of more material results.

The community participation scheme is central to the company’s claim to be ‘socially responsible’ and to have a ‘social licence to operate’. Chapter 4 demonstrated how representations of this achievement are produced: through rigorously documented evidence of the number of people in attendance at community meetings, and through the establishment of a Community Stakeholder Network that is itself taken as emblematic of the ‘good relationship’ between the company and ‘the community’. This arrangement, I showed, depends on a distinct kind of precarious labour: the unrecognised and unremunerated efforts of participants themselves. Participants’ aspirations to assist their community, and to build recognised professional identities, lead them to contribute time, energy, and even personal resources to the cause. In the process, they lose social credibility.

Officials' commitments to a normative definition of 'volunteering' as needing to entail working 'for free', and other residents' suspicions that participants might be securing forms of insider advantage that they have no access to, results in pervasive gossip of participants' moral calibre. They are called 'entitled', their requests for payment are denied, and some are asked to step down from their roles. Company resources are ringfenced for company staff and programmes; justified on the grounds that the intended livelihood opportunities for 'the community' – through the market – are still to come. Thus, the participation programme persists. New representatives, perceived to be of better moral and professional calibre, are elected in their place, and company resources continue to be dedicated to the work of administering and documenting 'good relations'.

What Chapter 4 began to show is that, even in the absence of promised market opportunities and in a place with few alternatives, the zone offers the unemployed the promise of valued advantages, albeit limited ones. Atlantis residents partake in the zone's schemes not just for the prospect of becoming ready for future market opportunities. They do so also in an attempt to secure institutional recognition, belonging, and small livelihood gains, in the instance that the zone's stated goals may never, in fact, materialise. Chapters 5 and 6 expanded upon this observation.

Chapter 5 investigated the zone's skills development programme. In line with national policy and international development best practice, skills development is posited as a major part of the solution to Atlantis' unemployment problem because it is meant to prepare people with the skills projected to be demanded by markets. But as this chapter demonstrated, in practice the work of skills development comes to centre on struggles for recognition of skills and capacities, precisely in the absence of 'market demand'. Officials focus on building up a database to prove their success at skills development, and to preserve their own credibility as specialists. Residents

attend skills trainings not only to develop new capabilities, but also to acquire the relevant ‘papers’ that they view as more important to secure recognition from employers in a competitive labour market. But, in a context where new skills systematically fail to translate into jobs, residents insist on more substantive forms of recognition from the institution itself – not just of their existing ‘intelligence and capacity’, but of their worth and deservingness of ‘care’, as post-apartheid citizens. The chapter shows that the skills programme is sustained through an institutionalised moral economy: in which officials feel that their obligations to unemployed residents extend beyond their formal ‘KPIs’, and in which residents press for wider forms of assistance. Skills development, in the absence of jobs, provides residents with the chance to make claims to informal work, extended stipends, transport, food, and emotional support, among other things. It is these informal relations and forms of claim-making that keep the skills programme going. They allow company claims to be readying a skilled labour force for market participation to remain plausible.

The final chapter afforded the chance to reflect more squarely on the role of public distribution in upholding the plausibility of zone success, and of future market participation. Towards the end of my fieldwork the zone company received word from the DTIC that they would be granted R89 million for the construction of the civil works of a part of the zone – that had, until now, been a dusty and overgrown patch of land. At this point, the zone’s enterprise development scheme became of major importance to officials. Mandated by public procurement law to allocate at least thirty per cent of the tender to SMMEs, officials reckoned with the potential that the construction might devolve into violent struggles over access to these funds. They worried that this might ‘scare away investors’ and sabotage the SEZ in its entirety. Chapter 6 explored the work of officials, and of the (unpaid) entrepreneurs

recruited to assist, to secure widespread recognition that the distribution of SMME opportunities would be transparent and rule-bound. In doing so, it demonstrated how the enterprise development scheme, meant to rest on ideals of self-reliance and meritocratic market competition, in practice depended on local entrepreneurs' struggles to have their entitlements to a share of public resources preserved. The chapter thus demonstrated how the 'formal' economy, in which the unemployed are meant to compete for their livelihoods, comes to be socially produced as plausibly orderly and rule-bound, even as many remain systematically excluded and the possibility of violent disruption is never beyond comprehension.

What Chapter 6 touched on, but demands further consideration in concluding this study, is the seriousness with which officials and residents talked about the possibility of violent disruption. More generally, the unemployed in South Africa are often depicted in public discourse as a 'ticking time bomb' (for example Assembly of the Unemployed, 2024; Liberia, 2025; Mathebula, 2025), the consequences of which are variously imagined as forms of crime, unrest and political instability, among others. Internationally, scholars have raised consideration of whether a thoroughly informalised workforce constitutes a 'dangerous class' (Breman et al., 2019, p.12), and suggest that 'the misery and anger of the wretched of the earth cannot be wished away any longer' (Breman et al., 2019, p.249). In response to perceived threats of this kind, as much as officials sought to promote the impression of their own 'inclusivity' and transparency in allocating SMME tender opportunities, they also sought recourse to securitisation. They contacted the local police and devised an emergency security plan to ensure the construction would go smoothly. This suggests a more coercive dimension to the zone's 'social licence to operate'. It also resurfaces a tension that I addressed explicitly in Chapter 1: wherein interventions to deal with Coloured unemployment historically straddled different rationales. While earlier

interventions designed to promote employment primarily for White citizens were framed in the language of meeting the entitlements of the deserving, later interventions designed primarily for African employment were framed in the language of social control. What we see in the case of the Atlantis SEZ in the post-apartheid era is that these imperatives – for socioeconomic improvement for the deserving; and for social control – appear to dovetail. The promise of socioeconomic improvement through market participation relies for its continued plausibility, at some level, on the availability of coercive measures to contain any threats to the status quo.

This being said, throughout my fieldwork I witnessed no examples of any Atlantis residents disrupting established processes. While many talked about the potential legitimacy of protest in general, I heard no one talk about taking a more active oppositional stance towards the zone itself. Instead, as I have demonstrated, many were actively invested in it. Residents found forms of advantage in the institution and its programmes at the same time as many continued to hope that, after many years, it might actually offer them more meaningful opportunities to participate productively in the economy.

It is precisely this undecidedness about the zone's outcomes which underlines the central contribution of this study. After a century of failed efforts to provide economic opportunities for the unemployed here, and after over a decade of its own lack of success, the Atlantis SEZ itself continues to be situated between 'success' and 'failure'. It has not generated market opportunities at scale, yet neither has it been abandoned. The thesis has shown that this in-between status is not incidental, but constitutive of how such interventions are sustained. Rather than being evaluated solely by its outcomes, the zone's status is continually negotiated through practices of calculation, narrativisation, and programme participation, in which diverse actors

often seek to do what they think is right, and to secure their own positions, credibility, and prospects when outcomes are uncertain. In this context, ‘success’ is not straightforwardly achieved, or not achieved; it is rendered plausible by those for whom this possibility offers some kind of advantage. This one intervention therefore provides a lens not just onto the uncertainty inherent in SEZs as vehicles for employment creation in contemporary capitalism, but onto how interventions that fail on their own terms to achieve socioeconomic improvement are reproduced through conflicting assessments of their prospects. By advancing this perspective, the thesis contributes to scholarly understandings of SEZs, development interventions, and the governance of economic life.

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Camille (pseudonym), Atlantis SEZ Company official, Atlantis, **12 September 2022**
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Nick (pseudonym), Atlantis SEZ Company executive, Online, **16 November 2022**

Alex (pseudonym), GreenCape official, Online, **21 June 2022**
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