



Issue paper for Session 6

Decent work opportunities for young women and men: Overcoming discrimination and disadvantage

Equality in diversity: A dream or a necessity?

The scale of the youth employment challenge

What young women and men do especially in their first work experiences has long-lasting effects for their own lives and for the future of their societies. Today's 15–24 year-olds are the most educated generation ever in world history. Nevertheless, many encounter difficulties in entering and remaining in the labour market.

Providing young people with opportunities to obtain and keep decent jobs today is the most effective way to increase their contribution to the prosperity and social cohesion of tomorrow's societies. The development and stability of democracies will also depend on how successfully young people transit from education to the world of work. In many communities around the world overcoming discrimination and disadvantage particularly as they affect young men and women is central to efforts to reduce anti-social behaviour, violence and crime.

Available figures portray a troublesome picture that points to policy failures in both developed and developing countries. In 2005, over 85 million youth – 15 million more than in 1995 – were unemployed, accounting for almost half of all unemployed globally. Another 300 million had jobs but lived in poverty, not earning enough to lift themselves and their families above US\$2 a day. And another 20 million are neither in the labour force nor studying: they stopped searching for a job because they had lost hope of finding one. In all, nearly 400 million youth around the world – or one in three of all aged 15–24 – suffer from a deficit of decent work opportunities.¹

Behind these figures are important variations by region and by sex. Everywhere female youth fare worse than their male peers. Even though there are countries and regions where unemployment is lower for young women than for young men, this often only means that women do not even try to find a job but leave the labour market, discouraged altogether. When they do find a job it is often lower paid and in the informal economy, in unprotected low-skill jobs. Inactivity is the most likely outcome of young women in many countries and their labour force participation is lower than for young men. This reflects

¹ ILO: Global employment trends for youth, Geneva, 2006.

differing cultural traditions and the lack of opportunities for women to combine work and family duties not only in the developing world but also in the industrialized world. The largest gaps in the participation of young men versus women are found in South Asia (35 percentage points) and the Middle East and North Africa (29 percentage points).²

The youth group most vulnerable to exclusion from the labour market are those who have grown up without access to decent education, housing and other vital elements of a secure and nurturing environment. Young people who enter the labour market without basic social competencies and skills as a result of such deprivation face the greatest difficulties in entering the job market and thus need the most support in developing the skills for a decent working life. In addition, some groups of youth regardless of their education or work experience encounter discrimination at work.

While youth employment is a challenge affecting all countries, the nature of the problem differs according to their stage of socio-economic development. While in industrialized countries the key issue is finding a job, in developing countries young people not only face higher barriers than adults in obtaining a job, but many find work only in the informal economy where they are often underemployed and unproductive.

The global policy response

In 2000, on the occasion of the Millennium Summit, the international community recognized the political urgency of addressing the youth challenge and committed to “develop and implement strategies that give young people everywhere a real chance to find decent and productive work.”³ Two years later, the ILO, alongside the United Nations and the World Bank, formed the UN Secretary-General’s Youth Employment Network (YEN) with the aim of broadening and strengthening support to member States through partnerships, nationally and globally.⁴

The commitment to making the goal of productive and decent work for all, including young women and men, a central objective of national and international policies was reiterated by the 2005 World Summit and by the High-level Segment of the 2006 UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC). The ILO’s contribution to the attainment of this goal is channelled through its Youth Employment Programme which provides assistance to countries in developing coherent and coordinated interventions. The programme’s work is guided by the resolution concerning youth employment adopted by the 93rd Session of the International Labour Conference, 2005, which calls upon the ILO to maximize the comparative advantage of its tripartite structure in its activities to promote decent work for

² *ibid.*

³ United Nations General Assembly, A/RES/55/2, 18 Sep. 2000, para. 20. This commitment is reflected in target 16 of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). Youth employment is key to achieving other goals such as those related to poverty reduction, education and gender equality.

⁴ YEN has focused its action on: assisting in the design of National Action Plans (NAP) for youth employment in lead countries; providing technical guidance and supporting capacity-building programmes for the implementation of the NAPs; and strengthening coherence between policy stances and the technical cooperation of the UN, the World Bank and the ILO.

young persons, and in particular to support employers and workers and their respective organizations in this important task.⁵

Youth employment deficits: Symptom of weak job growth

Data show that youth employment is heavily influenced by the overall labour market situation. When the overall unemployment rate rises, the youth unemployment rate rises as well, although at a different pace than in the case of adult workers. This means that job-rich growth is a necessary condition to address youth employment problems. Macroeconomics and sectoral policies can help increase the employment content of growth. But these efforts must be accompanied by policies that increase the demand for youth labour, while enhancing the employability of younger workers, especially the most disadvantaged ones. These include those that due to poverty, early pregnancy, in the case of many girls, or social pressure to work for pay at a very young age, in the case of many boys, have been left behind by schools.

Youth employment is a structural problem that requires integrated and coherent interventions. Action, however, is often taken when the situation becomes unmanageable. It tends to be short term and fragmented, and fails to address the structural causes of youth employment problems, while ignoring the different circumstances of different groups of youth. This may explain why, despite the huge efforts deployed around the world, the youth employment challenge not only has persisted, but, in some instances, even worsened.

Disadvantaged youth least likely to find decent work

Youth do not represent a homogeneous group. While aggregate figures show that, on average, young people find it much harder than adults to find and keep a job, opportunities, risks and vulnerabilities are unevenly distributed among them. Family background, gender, race, disability, national origin and nationality are important determinants of chances of finding a decent job.

These often reflect unequal educational attainment between different groups of youth that, in turn, may mirror inequalities in access to quality health and education services. Some young people, for instance, never attend school or begin working at very young ages. When poor parents need to make a choice about who among their children should receive an education, girls tend to be excluded first. Recent reports on the Millennium Development Goal (MDG) and Education for All targets have identified child labour as an obstacle to progress. The 2006 MDG report stated that “High rates of poverty in rural areas limit educational opportunities because of demands for children’s labour, low levels of parental education and lack of access to good quality schooling”. The 2007 Global Monitoring Report on Education for All called for policies aimed at “reaching the unreached”, children in child labour and other vulnerable groups who often continue to be left behind even when a country makes progress in boosting participation in education.

The literacy gap between young men and young women appears to be widening in Africa and Asia; the greatest gender inequalities are found in North Africa and western Asia, where educationally deprived girls outnumber the corresponding groups of boys by

⁵ Resolution concerning youth employment adopted by the International Labour Conference at its 93rd Session, Geneva, June 2005, www.ilo.org/public/english/standards/relm/ilc/ilc93/pdf/resolutions.pdf.

almost three to one.⁶ The disadvantages thus accumulated from the early stages of their lives, irrespective of their talents or aspirations, prevent them from acquiring the basic skills that the labour market demands. In other instances, social norms rather than the lack of basic education restrict the type and quality of jobs that many youth, particularly girls, can obtain. Constraints on physical mobility and prevailing stereotypes about what women and men are suitable for act as a barrier to girls' full participation in work and in conditions of equality. As a result, women's striking advances in educational attainments relative to men worldwide have not been matched by commensurate progress in the labour market.⁷ This entails a waste of human talents and suggests the existence of serious policy flaws. In yet other cases, discrimination in hiring and recruitment may be a factor. Studies show, for instance, that while education offers substantial wage returns to all youth, these returns tend to be higher for certain youth, particularly urban, white and male, than for others.⁸

Starting right: Key to getting a decent job

Young workers are over-represented in casual jobs with lower benefits, training opportunities and career prospects. Longer probation periods than for adult workers, lower entry wages, greater reliance on flexible forms of contract and special contracts to recruit young workers are widespread and contribute to their lower employment and wage outcomes.⁹ In developing countries, disadvantaged youth normally enter the labour market by engaging in unpaid or informal work. Starting in low-paying jobs or obtaining jobs that do not match their skills may not be problematic if youth can move eventually to more productive employment. But empirical evidence shows that not all youth are equally mobile: those with higher education tend to find more productive work more easily and quickly. Hence, starting with the wrong type of employment or in casual and low-paying jobs may condemn certain youth to become stuck in jobs that are precarious, low paid and offer no opportunity to further skill development. Starting right is therefore key to avoiding today's disadvantaged youth becoming tomorrow's unemployed or working poor adults. A particular focus is needed on breaking the cycle of poverty, child labour and low educational attainment.

The long-held belief that a high rate of employment among older workers reduces employment opportunities for new younger labour market entrants has been abandoned as a fallacy. Empirical evidence shows that substitution between younger and older workers rarely occurs. Entries are much more concentrated in the service sector and smaller firms, while the jobs vacated by older workers are found in the industrial sector and in bigger firms or require a level of skills and experience that younger workers do not possess. The urgent need to create workplaces suitable for all ages is apparent in the light of the present demographic trends. Measures targeting older workers cannot be taken in isolation from those targeting younger workers and vice versa, but must be framed in the context of an overall and well-balanced strategy for full employment which gives due attention to all population groups.¹⁰ This requires rethinking the conventional course of working life and

⁶ ILO: Global employment trends for youth, op. cit.

⁷ ILO: *Equality at work: Tackling the challenges*, Global Report under the follow-up to the ILO Declaration on Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work (ILO, Geneva 2007), p. 21.

⁸ P. Simon: "France and the unknown second generation: Preliminary results on social mobility", in *International Migration Review*, Vol. 37, No. 4 (2003), pp. 1091–1119.

⁹ R. Diez de Medina: *Jóvenes y empleo en los noventa*, (Montevideo, CINTERFOR, 2001).

¹⁰ ILO Older Workers Recommendation, 1980 (No. 162).

introducing more flexible and tailored working patterns which shift from competition to solidarity among age groups.

A policy framework for decent work for youth

A smooth transition from education to the labour market depends on a number of factors. One prerequisite is the availability of good educational opportunities for all at least to the compulsory school leaving age. A second is the availability of enough decent job opportunities for all. But equally important is how well female and male young workers are prepared for the labour market and how prepared the labour market is to receive them. This requires the design and implementation of targeted interventions.

Expanding decent work opportunities for young women and men

The demand for youth labour can be enhanced in many ways. Empirical evidence shows that government interventions in the form of wage subsidies or fiscal incentives to companies that hire youth can help first-time jobseekers. On the other hand, lowering entry wages for young workers, while justified for jobs that may demand higher skills than those possessed by young workers, has proven not to be effective in curbing youth unemployment.¹¹ There is a need also to correct for information failures on the demand side. The inaccurate assessment of the potential productivity, skills and work habits of an inexperienced young person may hinder his/her chances to obtain a job, while yielding a loss for the employer. Better tailored and unbiased recruitment and selection procedures may help employers make the right decision. A way of reducing underemployment and raising wages especially for low-income and low-skilled youth is through investments in labour-intensive public works. But to ensure that young women and men benefit on an equal footing, it is important that the level and mode of payment, conditions of work at the worksite, and the system of recruitment and mobilization do not exclude intentionally or unintentionally either gender.¹² A key focus of such policies must be on small and medium-sized enterprises which in many countries provide the bulk of first jobs for youth.

Enhancing the employability of young workers

One of the main challenges lies in the fact that many youth lack the skills and work habits that are in demand in the labour market. Tackling this challenge means first and foremost raising the quality and relevance of national education and training schemes with a view to ensuring that they adjust smoothly to the rapidly changing needs of companies and economies. The ILO with UNESCO, UNICEF, UNDP, the World Bank, Education International (EI), the Global March against Child Labour and several governments have formed a task force to mainstream the issue of child labour in national and international policy frameworks contributing to Education for All objectives.

Apprenticeship schemes and on-the-job training are effective means to facilitate the smooth transition of young men and women from school to work, provided that they are free from gender biases. The supply by employment agencies of career guidance, job counselling and labour market information that are well targeted and tailored to the

¹¹ M. Godfrey: *Youth employment policy in developing and transition countries: Prevention as well as cure*, Social Protection discussion paper, No. 32 (Washington, DC, World Bank, 2003).

¹² ILO: *Equality at work: Tackling the challenges*, op. cit., p. 72.

specific circumstances of the most “at risk” youth have shown to be highly effective in raising their chances to find and keep a job. Training policies also need to prepare young women and men to start and run small businesses. Entrepreneurship skills can provide an important boost to young people’s employment prospects.

Strengthening the governance of the youth labour market

The growing number of young people in intermittent, insecure and low-paid jobs in some countries and their over-representation in the informal economy in others require urgent action to improve their working conditions and to advance their rights at work. Labour market policies, regulations and institutions play a crucial role in matching the supply and demand sides of the labour market and are a key to promoting efficiency and equity in the labour market. Social dialogue between strong and representative trade unions and employers’ organizations is an important ingredient in sound policy-making and implementation.

Coherent and comprehensive laws, effective enforcement mechanisms and specialized bodies, with active labour market policies, can counter discrimination with comprehensive policies and enhance the job placement function in both the public and private employment services, and increase the employability of those who are vulnerable to discrimination. Measures to ensure decent work for young people also include the full enforcement of social and labour protection through well-resourced labour inspection systems, labour courts and functioning tripartite institutions. Effective action on youth employment requires concerted and determined action by several government ministries (e.g. trade and industry, finance, commerce, employment, education and training, youth affairs), as well as between central and local institutions.

But this alone is not enough. Governments need supportive enterprises that, in turn, need committed trade unions and civil society at large. Especially in developing countries, the organization of young people at work is critical to give “voice” to this overwhelming and yet under-represented segment of the workforce and to build more inclusive and accountable forms of governance. Experience at local level shows how social partners can cooperate in identifying the sectors with greatest potential for absorbing youth employment; finding the partner enterprises; and designing eligibility criteria that ensure that the ultimate beneficiaries are those most in need. In many countries partnerships and networks among different agents and stakeholders from the public, private and non-profit sectors have proven useful to pool knowledge, experience and resources. These efforts all combined can contribute to enhancing broad-based ownership of and commitment to youth employment measures and reforms.

Issues for discussion

- Increasing decent work opportunities for young women and men requires effective organization of education-to work-transitions. What more can be done to improve partnerships between the worlds of education and work? How can lessons from one country be better adapted and transferred to others?
- Many young people face difficulties in finding a job because of the mismatch between educational outcomes and labour market requirements. How can full-time education for the young in schools and other learning institutions be better adapted to labour market needs?

-
- There are groups of youth who encounter additional barriers in finding decent jobs because of their pre-work background. Do youth employment strategies focus sufficiently on those most vulnerable to exclusion? What measures have proven to be most effective in easing the integration of disadvantaged youth into the labour market?
 - Some groups of youth regardless of their education or work experience encounter discrimination at work. Sanctions are often perceived as a key means of fighting discrimination. Experience shows that other measures such as affirmative action or active labour market policies can be effective in promoting diversity and equity at work. What experience do we have of which policies are successful and which are not as regards young workers?
 - Employers often say they prefer to hire workers with experience but first-time workers have none. What policies and other interventions can help employers offer young workers opportunities to gain work experience?