



WORKSHOP ON

APPRENTICESHIP IN THE INFORMAL ECONOMY:

THE WEST AFRICAN REGION

ILO, Geneva, 3-4 May 2007

BACKGROUND NOTE

Many young people in the informal economy find themselves trapped in a vicious cycle of low skills, low productivity and low income. The absence of opportunities and resources for training prevents young workers from enhancing their employability to work out of poverty, and the economy to enhance technologies, productivity and development. The challenge is to provide learning opportunities to all young people and this represents the shared responsibility of society, that is, parents, community, enterprise, government and social partners.

Apprenticeship provides the traditional solution for developing and financing skills of young people in poor societies. This has also been the case in pre-industrial Europe. Many developing countries have established formal apprenticeship schemes and in a number of developed countries, traditional systems have evolved into formal or modern apprenticeship systems.

The ILO acknowledged the relevance of apprenticeship systems early on, through Apprenticeship Recommendation No. 60 (1939), which defines apprenticeship as:

“any system by which an employer undertakes by contract to employ a young person and to train him or have him trained systematically for a trade for a period the duration of which has been fixed in advance and in the course of which the apprentice is bound to work in the employer's service.”

The debate on the informal economy which was launched by the ILO during the 1970s also drew attention to apprenticeship systems in the informal economy. The ILO has undertaken research in this area during subsequent decades, mainly in West African countries, to shed light on their training systems. These systems went largely unrecognised by governments and training policies. Apprenticeship in this region has been described as an effective training system, providing relevant occupational skills to a large number of young people and helping poor people to gain access to training. However, the studies also identified important weaknesses and challenges such as the quality of training and the nature of skills provided, recognition of skills, equitable access or safety and health concerns.

The international policy debate on skills development has for a long time neglected apprenticeship and it is only recently regaining attention. In the light of growing informality in developing countries, high youth unemployment and limited capacities of formal education and training systems to provide vocational education and training to a large number of young people, the ILO includes the upgrading of informal training systems as an important policy option.

Furthermore, the ILO is committed to designing integrated policies to upgrade work in the informal economy and to reduce Decent Work deficits by promoting formalization and transition to the mainstream economy. Apprenticeship provides an entry point for multiple ILO activities to promote decent work in the informal economy. In addition to skills and employability, relevant issues relate to child labour, equality in access, entrepreneurship development, social protection, social dialogue and micro-finance. In the context of Decent Work Country Programmes, apprenticeship may provide an approach to deliver on country programme outcomes in the above areas in an integrated way.

Against this background, the ILO faces the challenge to develop policy messages that are suitable to improve skills development and achieve decent work in apprenticeship training and at the same time maintain or improve incentives of master craftspersons and young people to participate in apprenticeship.

In order to meet this challenge, policy makers need to better understand the institutions governing apprenticeship, analyse their dynamics, and explore policy options and their effectiveness to upgrade apprenticeship. They also need to determine the scope for institutional change and for linking apprenticeship in the informal economy with the formal training system as well as with formal labour markets.

The initial focus of the Skills and Employability Department's apprenticeship research will be Africa for two reasons. First, Africa represents one of the Employment Sectors' priority areas. Second, our state of knowledge is most advanced on apprenticeship in the informal economy in West-African countries while only limited research is available from other regions. The ILO will draw on existing experience and lessons learnt in West African countries and plans to undertake research in Ghana, Mali and Senegal.