

Informal apprenticeships and the future of work

Interview with Yasser Ali, and ILO Skills Technical Officer

Introduction by host:

Welcome to the ILO EMPLOYMENT podcast series, “Global Challenges, Global Solutions: The Future of Work”. I’m your host Tom Netter...and today we’re going to talk about apprenticeships in the informal economy and their impact on the future of work.

In a world with high rates of unemployment and underemployment, an ever-increasing number of people are looking for work amidst rapid change that is increasing skills mismatches and shortages.

This in turn, requires the development of new forms of training and learning. And nowhere is this more important than in the informal economy.

Millions of young people in the developing world acquire skills through apprenticeships in the informal economy. In many countries in Africa, for example, they greatly outnumber youth acquiring skills through formal technical and vocational education and training.

A new ILO Labour Standard on Quality Apprenticeships has focused new attention on the need to upgrade training and learning. But what kind of jobs are we talking about? And what can ILO members do to strengthen informal apprenticeships?

Joining us today to share his expertise is Yasser Ali, an ILO Technical Officer in Skills based in Amman, Jordan who has vast experience in the areas of skills development, training, coaching, and work-based learning, just to name a few.

Tom: Yasser, welcome to the programme.

Yasser: Hi, Tom.

Tom: Let's begin with some basic questions. Can you define the difference between formal and informal apprenticeships?

Yasser: Thanks, Tom. Without going in a very detailed definition of apprenticeship and using several terminology, I need to differentiate between formal apprenticeship and informal apprenticeship in terms of the elements of the apprenticeship program. So, we have several elements in any formal or informal apprenticeship starting from learning venue, which is the workplace, actually, in both formal and informal (apprenticeship), while in the informal apprenticeship we are talking more about micro and small enterprises. Regarding the learning content, both formal and informal apprenticeships, the learning of the skill of the occupation happens by experienced craftsperson. While in the formal apprenticeship, we are talking more about structural formal curricula, which follows the national or accredited curricula, which is not the case with informal apprenticeship. For the learning process, mainly the work process has the on-job training in both formal and informal apprenticeships. What makes the formal apprenticeship differ from the informal apprenticeship is the dual system or the duality where the classroom or off-job training also existed in formal apprenticeship, which is not the case for informal apprenticeship where all the training happens in workplaces.

Coming to the training agreement, both formal apprenticeship and informal apprenticeship have a training agreement, which is mostly written-based in the formal apprenticeship and it is regulated by formal laws and acts. While mostly in the informal apprenticeship, it is verbal one, it's not written one, and it is embedded in local norms and tradition of a society. Now the parties of the formal and informal apprenticeship. In the formal apprenticeship, we have the apprentice, we have the employer or craftsperson, but also, we have the government, we have the activity provider, which is not mostly existing in the informal apprenticeship. And the training agreement is concluded by the apprentice all alone with the employer. And the cost sharing, it happens between the employer and apprenticeship. While in the formal apprenticeship we have the government, we have the activity provider which have some sort of cost sharing. So, this is simply the differences between the formal apprenticeship and

informal apprenticeship, in terms of the learning venue, the content, the process, the training agreement, and the cost sharing.

Tom: Okay, great. Can you give us an idea of the size of the population involved in informal apprenticeships?

Yasser: Actually, this is a very detailed evidence about the informal apprenticeship. I will come here briefly and mention that almost we have 2 billion of the population, which is aged 15 and more who work informally, and this represents about 60 per cent of the global employment, and this varies from one country to another and from one region to another. For example, in Africa this could reach 85 per cent. In our Arab state, it reaches about 70 per cent. So, we are talking about a good portion of employment and also learning, which has happened and occurs in informal settings. As you see that it could reach 80 per cent or 70 per cent of total employment (that) happen in informal apprenticeships.

Tom: Have informal apprenticeships evolved over time?

Yasser: Let's say that actually the informal apprenticeship is the most common form of learning, and I'm pretty sure to say that it's the only type of vocational training which has happened in the past. So, I'm giving example from our region, our Arab state, which the apprenticeship or informal apprenticeship was the most common form of learning in many occupations, especially in the craft and related trade. In past and until the beginning of 20th century, the father would bring his son to one of the employer or craftsman and ask him to teach his son the profession or the occupation. From this point, the employer or craftsman take on the responsibility of the training. It's not only the responsibility of learning, but also the responsibility of his action, his conduct and also his life, his socio-economic life. So, in many cases, the trainee's social life, the savings, the marriage, all are the responsibility of the employer.

In other words, this apprenticeship combined the transfer of knowledge and the training in the profession with acceptable limits to work rights and conditions as well as socio-economic aspect that the employer played with the training. So, you can imagine, Tom, how this informal apprenticeship was established that the employer or craftsman not only cared about the learning, the occupation, the trainee, but he is also responsible about his life, about his socio-economic life, about every detail in his life. This is one form of informal apprenticeship that include many items which we are struggling nowadays to achieve and we are not succeeding.

Tom: That brings me to the question of how do these informal apprenticeships actually deliver quality and relevant skills training that would align with labour market needs?

Yasser: In principle, yes, informal apprenticeship is able to deliver quality and relevant skill training because simply the training process is okay in real workplaces and the knowledge transfer, as we saw from the definition, that the knowledge transfer from the experienced master craftsperson or employer. So simply, the skill of the trade of the occupation is automatically transferred from the craftsperson to trainee in real workplaces. However, this is not the ideal case and from my experience, I had two main observations to that. First, this is largely dependent on the extent that the enterprise or master craftsperson is updating to the new technology in the market because not all employers or craftsperson are updated to the new technology, emerging technology, and this affects the knowledge transfer to the new technology to the trainee. And the transition from learning to employment is slow in informal apprenticeship and this could extend to years particularly in micro and the small enterprises. So, this is the main observation that could affect the transfer of the knowledge and the delivery of the quality and relevant skill from the employer to trainee.

Tom: Well, you've touched on this before, but on a country level, what is being done to improve the quality of informal apprenticeships? Can you give us some of the priorities? Are there new forms of certification? OSH learning quality?

Yasser: In reality government are more concerned in formal education and training system and less interested with the informal system, although it's large portion compared with formal one. One of the dimensions that the government concern with informal worker in some country is the provision of some sort of certification process that ensures worker have occupation and license to practice the occupation. It comes as a type of regulation labour market more than improving skill delivery and informal apprenticeship. Occupation, health, and safety, for example, come as inspection component applied by government for all enterprises without taking into consideration the differences and challenge in complying with the needed requirement. But, yes, a gradual approach is needed here, and it is also implemented in some countries. For example, some countries work on national framework on apprenticeship that cover all type of apprenticeship and work-based learning, including informal apprenticeship. This approach entails improving both the learning process, supporting the enterprise, improving learning and enabling environment because improving learning process alone through linking informal apprenticeship with formal education and new training system could lead in improving the type of training and skill delivery and reduce the transition period from learning to employment.

However, this needs to (be) combined with supporting the enterprises. So, this is the two main wings of any informal apprenticeship. Learning process and also supporting the enterprises. Without supporting the enterprises, we cannot achieve what we need from the informal apprenticeship. So, this include upgrading the technical skill of master craftsman to the marketing new technology, improving learning environment with the needed equipment and raw material, applying intensive mentoring, coaching, monitoring, tracking and assessment to apprenticeship and training progress, improving the work organization and management, improving the occupational health and safety. So, the enabling environment in terms of decent work dimension need also support mainly encouraging and supporting employer and worker coverage by the social protection floor.

In addition to that, improving efficiency and effectiveness is a fundamental rationale with goal of making the system less exploitative and less burden to the people. However, this is not easy if the main building blocks of apprenticeship systems are not established. Mainly the clear role and responsibility of different stakeholders and the funding arrangement in addition to setting a clear regulatory framework. To make this happen, meaningful social dialogue among the government, social partners, private sector, activity provider, and other actors is essential.

Tom: Now, you've mentioned social dialogue. What is the role of social dialogue in informal apprenticeships? And how can it be further strengthened?

Yasser: Yes. Social dialogue is a cornerstone of the ILO's work, including all types of negotiation, consultation or even simply an exchange of information between or among representatives of government, employers, workers, in issues of common interest relating to economic and social policy. Now the relationship between social dialogue and quality apprenticeship takes various form in different countries. Tri-partite, bi-partite bodies exist in many countries to formulate, implement and monitor apprenticeship training policy. Similarly, apprenticeship training may be subject to negotiation between government and social partners or just between employer association and union. The engagement of social partner, both employer, union and professional association is necessary to ensure that the organization and the content of apprenticeship meet the need of employer and the wider economy and the student. Now, many countries, even my country, Jordan, have established national skill sector bodies for council, which is employer-led governance body tasked with leading skill development in their sector.

These bodies can play a vital role in strengthening the social dialogue toward meaningful outcome that address the key building blocks of apprenticeship and the

main elements of apprenticeships, including the apprentice employer learning content and process training agreement, cost sharing, learning environment, and the decent work aspect. Let me, to say, Tom, that this is not a dream. It's what happened in the past and it can be happened in the future. Just to mention that what we are striving to achieve nowadays was a reality in the past. So, replicating it is not a dream.

Just one example of my Arab and Islamic region, mentioning about the concept of Islamic Waqf, which is endowment or charity. It spread until the 19th century and it is extended in a wide range of services including basic needs, schools and hospitals. It's also included unemployment prevention, small scale project and the training. Imagine Waqf, there was a dedicated Islamic endowment for teaching craft and profession. This has happened for years and centuries highlighting the role of society and the private sector in supporting vocational and apprenticeship programs.

So, Tom, we no longer have this role, and we are now struggling to have the community and private sector support for training and apprenticeship programs. Social dialogue could happen. It happened in the past and could happen in the future, but with the condition of meaningful social dialogue that includes all party concerned with apprenticeship and vocational trade.

Tom: Well, thanks. Let me ask you one final question. What do you think is needed to build greater international, regional or national cooperation on quality apprenticeships and how would this affect informal apprenticeships?

Yasser: Actually, there is much to do here. The Quality Apprenticeship Recommendation, R208, which is endorsed in 2023, recently mentioned some action here, including exchanging information in good practice in all aspect of quality apprenticeship, also cooperating to a far expanding learning opportunity to apprentices and to recognize competencies required through apprenticeship program or prior learning. In addition to building effective partnerships to promote quality apprenticeship programs, including through tri-partite national, sectoral or even occupational skill bodies, global and regional alliances and apprenticeship network and promoting the recognition of apprenticeship qualification nationally, regionally, and internationally. So, this is mentioned in the Quality Apprenticeship Recommendation, but personally I believe that provision of real success, implementation of upgraded informal apprenticeship is the most crucial one. This key building block of apprenticeships seem to be hard to achieve. Providing real example in how social dialogue help in shaping upgraded informal apprenticeship and defining clear roles and responsibility stipulated in national regulatory framework is very necessary here.

So, providing more realistic financial arrangement and other key building blocks coping with the context of developing country and applicable even in small and micro enterprises is a primary importance. So, what we need to exchange, real examples that solve the main issue and challenge in the six building blocks of apprenticeship and mainly about the role and responsibility, social dialogue, the funding arrangement. Having a realistic example from several countries can guide other countries to do it and build on their experience. And by this, I think we can improve informal apprenticeships and make the key drivers and the key building blocks of formal apprenticeships also happen in informal apprenticeships. Thank you.

Tom: Yasser, thanks very much for sharing your interesting insights today and helping us understand more about this issue.

One thing is clear: informal apprenticeships are vital to helping youth find work and improve their livelihoods. Will they lead to good, decent jobs? Will people in the informal sector eventually be able to transition to more formal employment, if they want to?

These and other questions bear watching. In the meantime, the ILO's work in this domain, both in the past and present, goes a long way toward strengthening the informal apprenticeship system for a better future of work.

I'm Tom Netter, and you've been listening to the ILO EMPLOYMENT podcast series, "Global Challenges, Global Solutions: The future of work". For more on this, go to www.ilo.org/employment. Meanwhile, thank you for your time.