

THE BAHAMAS NATIONAL TRAINING PROGRAMME

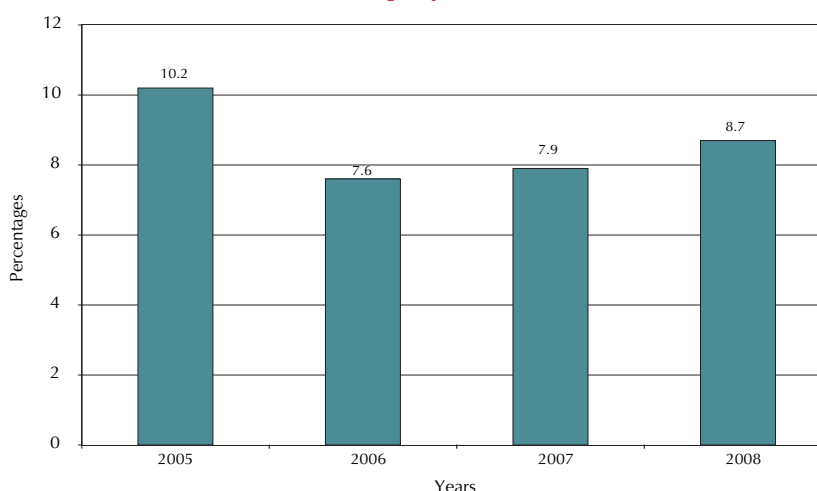
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The Government of The Bahamas has moved to cushion the impact of the recession on persons who have lost their jobs by paying unemployment benefits under the National Insurance Scheme. This is a temporary financial measure to assist eligible workers who became unemployed and are unable to find employment. Individuals receive US\$ 250 every two weeks for a period of 13 weeks (the minimum wage in The Bahamas is US\$ 150 per week). In addition to this measure, a collaborative effort between the Government, business community, trade unions, and the Churches will provide training to 1,000 Bahamians, about 10% of the unemployment figure. Training will be provided in occupations where there are strong demands from the business sector and where participants are likely to secure jobs.

1. Introduction

Prior to the recession, the employed labour force for The Bahamas grew steadily from 160,530 to 174,920 persons between 2005 and 2008, while the unemployed labour force for the same period showed a total of 18,175 or 10.2 % for 2005; 13,750 or 7.6% for 2006; 14,615 or 7.9% for 2007 and 16,675 or 8.7% for 2008 (see figure 1). Although there was no corresponding decrease in the number of unemployed, however, there was a light gain in the unemployment figure between 2006 and the first quarter of 2008. The unemployment figure for 2009 will certainly show a different picture.

Figure 1
The Bahamas: Unemployment rate, 2005-2008



Source: The Bahamas Department of Statistics.

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As the global financial and economic crisis deepens, most countries are faced with the dilemma: How can government reduce the impact of the crisis on the economic structure of its country and more importantly, how to get those who lost their jobs back to work? As the economic downturn continues, a number of Caribbean countries are experiencing layoffs in both the private and public sectors. Recognizing the severity of the impact of the financial crisis, Caribbean Heads of Government through CARICOM established a Task Force to coordinate a regional plan of action with a view to finding solutions for the region.² This is also in line with the ILO Global Jobs Pact which proposes a range of crisis measures that countries can adapt to their specific situations.

The Bahamas economy is driven by tourism and tourism-driven construction and manufacturing, which provide an estimated 60% of the gross domestic product (GDP) in addition to employing about half of the Bahamian work-force. In the last quarter of 2008, approximately 1,000 tourism sector employees lost their jobs.³ The weakened tourism output subsequently led to a corresponding decline in construction and other sectors of the economy.⁴

The Government of The Bahamas moved to cushion the impact of the recession on persons who have lost their jobs by paying unemployment benefits under the National Insurance Scheme, funded in the amount of US\$ 20 million from the National Insurance Board (NIB) established since 1974. This is a temporary financial measure to assist eligible workers who became unemployed and are unable to find employment. Individuals receive US\$ 250 every two weeks for a period of 13 weeks. This was comparable to a full time job, earning the minimum wage of US\$ 4 per hour or US\$ 150 per week. Because the financial assistance was on temporary basis, the government was still faced with the problem of reducing the impact of the crisis on the economic structure of its country and more importantly, how to get those who lost their jobs back to work?

Recognizing the severity of the impact of the crisis, the Government of The Bahamas, after extensive consultation with trade union leaders, employers' representatives and the Bahamas Christian Council, took a bold measure to plan, design and implement a programme geared towards retraining persons who lost their jobs and are receiving financial assistance.⁵

2. Description of the Programme

The retraining programme due to start on September 7, 2009 will provide skills, knowledge and attitude training to 1,000 Bahamians about 10% of the unemployment figure, in addition to other stimulus response programmes that had provided jobs for the unemployed. The criteria for selection include any person who is displaced and looking for a job, receiving temporary financial assistance under the National Insurance Scheme, able to provide details of previous employment history, level of education and proof of citizenship.

Training will be for a period of 10 weeks in occupations where there is strong demand from the business sector and where participants are likely to secure jobs after training. These areas include, but are not limited to the following: masonry; carpentry; welding; tile laying; electrical; accounting; diesel mechanic; agriculture/farming; landscaping; data processing; computer skills; day care assistant; and housekeeping.⁶

2 Caribbeannet news (2009) Important CARICOM Heads of Governments Conference achieves significant progress. Available at <http://www.caribbeanetnews.com/news-17519--39-39--.html> (July 14, 2009).

3 US Department of State (2009) Background Note: The Bahamas. Available at <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/1857.htm> (July 15, 2009).

4 Gilbert, L. (2009) Global recession severely impacts Bahamas economy. Available at <http://www.caribbeanetnews.com/news-17390--25-25--.html> (July 14, 2009).

5 The Bahamasweekly.com (2009). The global crisis and The Bahamas. 2009/2010 Budget communication. Available at http://www.thebahamasweekly.com/publish/bis-news-updates/Bahamas_Prime_Minister_Delivers_2009_2010_Budget_Communication-006505.shtml (July 14, 2009).

6 Gilbert, L. (2009) Global recession severely impacts Bahamas economy. Available at <http://www.caribbeanetnews.com/news-17390--25-25--.html> (July 14, 2009).

The Bahamas Technical and Vocational Institute (BTVI) and the College of The Bahamas (COB) are the two institutions which will be delivering the skills training in the aforementioned occupations. Due to limitations in capacity of these institutions, the programme will be divided into three sessions consisting of 333 participants per session. The training will be executed in a manner which maximizes the available resources in terms of funding and institutional capacity. The Government of the Bahamas has allocated US\$ 250,000 for technical and academic training, while the business community, trade unions and Churches have committed to the sum of US\$ 70,000 in administrative cost.

3. Planning, designing and implementation

Officials of the ILO Subregional Office for the Caribbean and CINTERFOR had discussions with the Bahamians on approaches to the planning, design and implementation of the retraining initiative. Suggestions provided to the Implementation Advisory Committee to which were considered include the following:

Talent management profile

Important data for each potential applicant should be collected to help placement decisions so that a potential job matches an applicant's profile. The data may include: level of education, previous employment/job, job responsibilities, work experience, occupation or area of interest for acquiring new skills, interest in starting a small business and other relevant information. Understanding the skills and talents of individuals and placing them into relevant programmes, will serve as a motivating factor for individuals to complete the training.

Labour market data

For a retraining initiative to be successful, skills training should be provided in occupations where trainees are likely to secure employment. Up-to-date labour market information is critical in the planning stage. The Committee should work with relevant agencies to obtain a list of businesses and industries that are hiring, and those that are likely to hire in the next 13 weeks. Other important information may include job descriptions, competencies, and industry certification needed by employers in the occupations for which training is provided.

Training/Design

The design of the training programme will determine its quality and sustainability. Short-term (10-13 weeks) training must be carefully structured; job competencies and certification requirements are to be included in the curriculum. Where industry experience is required, apprenticeship training should be organized during or after the training. The design should also take into consideration the level of training so that participants are prepared for future growth. This can be achieved if curriculum materials used are based on industry standards, and the level of training is established. CINTERFOR will provide access to training materials requested by the institutions providing the training.

Career/Job fair

It is extremely important to organize a career fair to attract enterprises likely to employ those persons who complete the training programme. They will also have a chance to showcase their business/industry. When a career fair is organized before commencement of training, it can help in the final placement decision, as participants may develop an interest in a particular occupation based on information they receive. When a participant pursues skills in an area of his/her interest, there is a higher chance of completing the training and securing employment.

Enterprise skills training

The ILO's 'Start Your Business' (SYB) training of trainers programme was suggested as an integral part of the training initiative, a strategy for the capacity building for the development of sustainable small businesses enterprise

skills. The flexible modules of the programme can be combined with the knowledge, skills and attitude training, thereby preparing participants to become entrepreneurs. The ILO's experience in this area and other empirical evidence suggest that training in business development is likely to enhance the success rate and sustainability of small enterprises.

The ILO will adopt a Training of Trainers' (ToT) strategy for the implementation of SYB. A group of 15-20 trainers from the Bahamas will receive training in SYB, and will be certified by ILO after having passed an assessment test. They can then provide SYB training to workers who have been laid-off and to other potential entrepreneurs. The aim is to stimulate interest in entrepreneurship and build capacity for enterprise creation. The ILO will provide technical backstopping, refresher courses for SYB trainers and further training in other areas such as 'Improve Your Business' (IYB) and 'Expand Your Business' (EYB). Support will also be provided in the fields of business advisory services, monitoring, evaluation and impact assessment.

Micro-financing

Mindful of the difficulty faced by small entrepreneurs in accessing financing for setting up and expanding businesses, the Government of the Bahamas is establishing a microfinance fund to provide "seed money" to such persons. The ILO's Social Finance Unit has been approached for technical advice in the running of this unprecedented initiative that is supposed to reinforce enterprise development and technical and vocational training activities.

4. Conclusion

The Ministry of Labour and Social Development has established a tripartite-plus Implementation Advisory Committee to coordinate all activities related to the re-training programme. The Committee submitted a training proposal to Cabinet, which incorporated ILO suggestions to which was approved. Subsequent to the approval, applicants were interviewed and about 1,000 persons have been selected for the training, due to start on September 7, 2009. The training programme is intended to build on its success and to maintain a strategy for retraining in the future.