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The need for active, labour market policies

ILO, as a specialized agency of UN, seeks the promotion of social justice and fundamental principles and rights since its inception in 1919. The primary goal of the ILO today is to promote opportunities for women and men to obtain decent and productive work, in conditions of freedom, equity, security and human dignity.

Achieving decent work for youth is a challenge shared by all countries across the world these days. As per Global Employment Trends 2011 report, more than 200 million people are unemployed worldwide, including nearly 80 million youth.

The global youth unemployment rate stood at 12.6 percent in 2010, up from 11.8 percent in 2007. On average, young women and men are two to three times more likely to be unemployed than adults.

Young persons

In Asia and the Pacific today young women and men between the ages 15 and 24 years accounts for 18 percent of region's population but 44 percent of the unemployed, 3.5 times more likely than adults to be unemployed. Their potential is not being fully realized because they lack access to productive and decent work.



Participants at the head table of 'Young Voices from Sri Lanka' workshop

It is timely therefore that the Director-General of the ILO has taken the initiative to convene national level consultative workshops exclusively for young persons through cross sectional participation, to hear their voices, listen to their needs, hear them out on their dreams and aspirations and provide space for developing home-grown strategies premised upon international norms to promote equality in treatment for the world's youth at their own country level.

The government of Sri Lanka, along with other stakeholders, has shown strong commitment to addressing youth unemployment which is evidenced by the establishment of the Youth Employment Network (YEN) a partnership amongst the ILO, the UN and the World Bank of which Sri Lanka is also a pioneer member.

As we compliment the government and other stakeholders for their untiring efforts over the years to address this growing crisis, it is also time to take stock of these efforts and the persistent and stubborn challenges that stymie improvements in youth employment trends.

There was a noticeable decline in labour force participation in Sri Lanka over the past few years that has been attributed to the decline in young people's participation in the labour force.

Decent work agenda

The drop in overall youth participation alludes to young people continuing their education and/or acquiring skills to be better prepared to enter the world of work. This has resulted in youth reaching higher education levels which is the dividends of Sri Lanka's free education policies over many decades.

However, this has not translated into favourable youth employment results as the statistics show us that some of the highest unemployment rates are recorded amongst youth with higher educational attainment whilst in general, Sri Lanka's youth are three times as unemployed as their adult counterparts.

The ILO has initiated programmes in Sri Lanka to support youth employment premised upon the four 'E's of employment, namely through promoting equality in access to decent work; strengthening the employability of youth persons to make the transition from school-to-work; building entrepreneurship skills for young people as a means to economic empowerment whilst working closely with employers towards employment creation for young persons by promotion of investment in sectors that generate jobs for youth - all of this founded on the decent work agenda and the 'mantra' of fundamental principles and rights at work.

It is also imperative that forward-looking, active labour market policies for job growth and productivity in all sectors be formulated to harness the energies of our young men and women be addressed as articulated in the National Human Resource Development and Employment Policy just validated.

It is equally important to address the country's decent work gaps, particularly the gender asymmetry in the world of work whilst supporting special strategies and programmes to address the needs of special groups in the young labour force.

Collective action

For the ILO, the promotion of decent work for young people is a central concern. We believe that integrated approaches are needed in view of the multi-dimensional nature of the challenges facing youth and a strong appeal should be made for fundamental change in approaches for realizing social justice.

Collective action that could help change the future for young people include: better training and education and measures to prepare young people for the labour market, encouraging youth entrepreneurship and enterprise development, effective implementation of international labour standards and the defending of labour rights, the engagement of youth in social dialogue, and sharing experience on tackling youth unemployment challenges.

Today is an opportunity for the youth of Sri Lanka to voice their opinions on issues of youth employment; to let us know what works for them and what does not, so that adult leaders can reflect upon the past; listen to the key stakeholders, namely the youth, and formulate doable, practical and impactful programmes for ensuring a better future for all young people in Sri Lanka.

We hope, the young people's representatives gathered here, to provide us with guidance for a long-term, coherent and concerted effort to successfully address youth unemployment, in Sri Lanka.

Our common future depends on the next generation. If they fall, we fall. As Mideast crises are showing us, jobs creation for youth is a crucial issue. We must address youth unemployment problem and promote decent jobs for them. I can assure you that the ILO will continue working with its constituents to pursue its Decent Work Agenda, thus creating greater employment opportunities for youth in Sri Lanka.

Let me convey the best wishes to all youth participants from Subinay Nandy, the UN Resident Coordinator in Sri Lanka. He pledges the support of the United Nations to help the young people in Sri Lanka realize their full potential, overcome the 'storm and stress' of the past and claim their youth in this second birth!

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