

Decent work for Africa's Youth

Africa has the youngest population in the world: Young women and men represent the continent's best hope for getting on a sustainable development path. However, youth unemployment rates are double adult unemployment rates for Africa as a whole – for North Africa they are even four times higher. ILO Online reports from Egypt where the ILO supports a pioneering project helping youth to find decent employment after leaving school.

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BORG EL ARAB, Egypt (ILO Online) – Baher Mahmoud Hatem is a teacher in Borg el Arab, home to the airport of Alexandria, the second largest city of Egypt.

Baher tells us what work used to be for him before he joined an ILO training course: “I went to work every day. We gave routine classes: It did not matter what we were teaching, or what the students wanted.”

One day, Baher and some of his colleagues were asked to participate in a two-day training organized by the ILO in cooperation with the public employment services office in Borg el Arab within the framework of the Project which seeks to ensure an effective school to work transition through career guidance for youth funded by Italy.

The training revolved around team work, capacity building and how to use career guidance for youth employment. In the beginning, Baher was not very interested, but the more he listened, he realized that he had an important role to play towards his students as a teacher.

“I realized how important the role of a teacher is in changing lives, as well as our responsibility to society. The next day, I was eager to learn more and to know what career guidance is and what would be my role. It made a difference to me to be able to help the students choose their careers, to be satisfied with their studies and with their work afterwards”, he explains.

Finally, Baher joined the project task force and participated in all project activities during the year. He even decided to obtain a Master's Degree, to acquire more knowledge and be able to give even better guidance.

“This allowed me to organize career guidance activities for the students. I also adopted these approaches at home, with my wife and kids”, he says.

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“90 per cent of the unemployed in Egypt are below 30. The unemployment rate for young people is six times higher than for adults. And the few young people that find a job are disadvantaged in terms of wages and working conditions compared to adults”, explains Dorothea Schmidt, a senior ILO employment expert in the ILO office in Cairo.

Ms. Schmidt also sees, “a mismatch between young people's job expectations and the jobs available in the labour market, together with a mismatch between employers' expectations in terms of skills and those obtained by university graduates and graduates of vocational training centres and technical schools”.

Failure to find decent employment after leaving school can have lasting effects on occupational patterns and incomes over the lifespan of an individual. Guiding youth to the right vocational choice as well as improving school-to-work transition may help overcome the common difficulties that youth, and particularly young women, face in terms of limited access to reliable labour market information, advice and support”, explains Luca Azzoni, a Senior Skills and Employability Specialist in the ILO office in Cairo.

Modernizing Egypt's labour market institutions

The aim of the ILO project is therefore to make it easier for young people to enter the world of work by modernizing Egypt's employment offices. The project builds up capacities in public employment services offices (PES) to offer job counselling and career guidance, identifying employers' needs and job matching. To support PES in their activities, the project establishes linkages between PES and government ministries, educational institutions, social partners (employers, trade unions), youth associations and civil society.

The selection of the governorates to be covered by the project was undertaken carefully to cover key segments of the Egyptian economy: Fayoum with its agricultural and tourism potential; Alexandria and 6 October City for their new industrial sites promising to absorb more workers; and Luxor and Aswan as top destinations for tourists.

"The focus on the employment counselling in career guidance is a relatively new area in Egypt and this is the first ILO project addressing this issue at the national level. The achievements of the Public Employment Services Offices in the five project sites include providing career guidance to a total of 12,000 young people and employing 9,000 young persons in various enterprises with variable qualifications", explains Mr. Azzoni.

This project is closely tied to meeting Egypt's agreed targets under the United Nations Development Assistance Framework (UNDAF) for 2007-2011, and supports the implementation of the road map for recovery that was agreed between the ILO and the Ministry of Manpower in the wake of the revolution of early 2011.

"The interim government and several donors have shown great interest in the approach and are willing to extend the project to other governorates in Egypt", says Nagwa Ismail, the ILO National Project Coordinator. "The approach not only increases the chances of youth to find a job – young people also learn skills that will be essential in the post revolutionary democratization process".

Charles Dan, ILO Regional Director for Africa sees a great potential for upscaling and replication of the pilot project. "Youth employment promotion is the foremost country priority identified in the ILO's Decent Work Country Programmes in Africa. There is indeed great potential in this project for expansion at the national level. More Egyptian youth would thus benefit from career guidance and be better equipped to join the labour market", he concludes.