

Building Haiti through training and employability programmes

As a reaction to the devastating earthquake that struck Haiti in January 2010, the international community has pledged multi-billion US\$ support programmes. However, the country will only be able to harvest this massive support if it finds qualified professional and technical staff for implementation. ILO Online spoke with Michael Axmann, a senior ILO skills development specialist, about a new ILO proposal for a large-scale training and employment programme to strengthen employability of Haitian workers and productivity of Haitian enterprises.

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Two years after the earthquake, Haiti still presents a huge challenge to the international community?

Michael Axmann: With 56 per cent of the population living in extreme poverty on less than US\$1.25 a day, Haiti is the poorest country in the Western Hemisphere. High rates of unemployment in the formal and a large informal economy dominate the labour market. The earthquake that struck on 12 January 2010 exacerbated an already challenging situation. Approximately 220,000 people were killed and another one million displaced in the metropolitan area of the Haitian capital. Damages and reconstruction costs are estimated to be USD 11.5 billion.

What is the impact on education and training?

Michael Axmann: The impact of the earthquake on education and training has been particularly devastating. According to government estimates, for the eastern region of Haiti which comprises more than half of the school facilities nationwide, over 80 per cent of schools were destroyed or seriously damaged. The technical and vocational education and training (TVET) facilities were also hard hit with 8 out of 9 public training institutions and all 11 of the private training institutions either destroyed or seriously damaged.

The damage caused a major setback to an already under-performing educational system. Approximately 40 per cent of children aged 6 to 15 are not in school. With less than 9 per cent of students continuing to training institutions and less than 1 per cent in higher education, education and skills development for the next generation in Haiti poses a major challenge.

How does this skills gap impact on the Haitian economy?

Michael Axmann: Low levels of educational attainment and training have resulted in a dearth of qualified workers for specific sectors in Haiti. According to government estimates, a mere 6 out of 1000 workers in the labour market possess a diploma or certificate within a technical or professional field. The sector in which this shortage is particularly acute is construction. Given the vast damage caused by the earthquake, the labour market demands within the construction sector have grown considerably over the past two years.

To address these shortages, workers with technical and management skills in construction have been brought in from other countries, including the Dominican Republic and Brazil. If Haiti wants to become less dependant on external expertise, a national training and employability initiative within the construction sector is urgently needed.

A possible ILO project would focus on the construction sector?

Michael Axmann: The ILO conducted a mission to Haiti in July 2011 to take stock of the demand-side of the training system and identify employment potential and skills needs in the construction sector. Through discussions with national stakeholders and regional staff, the mission confirmed the relevance of this sector as a starting point given the serious skills deficit and high potential for job creation therein.

The strategic focus of the project is organized into two main pillars, training and employability, to support workers in the informal economy prepare for better work in reconstruction efforts and to link training to employment opportunities and draws heavily on experiences, activities and projects carried out by the ILO

CRISIS team in Haiti under the Coordinator of the ILO activities, Antonio Cruciani and his team, since September 2010.

Within the field of training and employability, the ILO has accumulated a wealth of experience and expertise in a wide variety of country contexts. This includes national training system reforms, upgrading informal apprenticeships, training entrepreneurs and developing understanding about employment services. The ILO will draw on this expertise to adapt and integrate relevant concepts into the technical cooperation project in Haiti, and find synergies and complementarities with projects of other development agencies.

The project would be in line with the G20 Training Strategy?

Michael Axmann: During the G20 Summit in Pittsburgh in 2009, world leaders called for putting quality jobs at the heart of the recovery and asked the ILO, in partnership with other organizations and the social partners, to develop a training strategy for their consideration. The resulting G20 Training Strategy: A Skilled Workforce for Strong, Sustainable, and Balanced Growth highlights nine building blocks of strong training and skills development strategies: anticipating skill needs, participation of social partners, sectoral approaches, labour market information and employment services, training quality and relevance, gender equality, broad access to training, finance, and assessing policy performance.

One year later, at the G20 meeting in Seoul, Korea, it was decided that pilot countries would be identified in each region according to specified criteria. The ILO is building collaboration with other international organizations to improve coordination in responding to the request for the support in improving skills development. With the new government in place since 19 October 2011, better training and employment opportunities are high on the country's agenda. Workers' and employers' organizations in Haiti have also expressed their strong support for improving skills and preparing for new job growth in reconstruction.