

“Creating jobs for youth is not enough. Across the planet, youth are not only finding it difficult if not impossible to find jobs, but also they cannot find decent jobs... We are facing not only an economic challenge, but a security threat of monumental proportions.”

Juan Somavia, ILO Director-General

Across Asia and the Pacific, youth unemployment and underemployment have increased significantly over the past decade. While unemployment has risen generally, young workers have borne the brunt: although only one in five workers is in the 15-24 age bracket, this group accounts for almost half of the region's jobless. Young people are more than three times as likely as adults to be unemployed. Young women, although they generally perform better than their male counterparts in education, tend to fare worse in terms of un- or underemployment.

There is also a cruel irony in the coexistence of child labour and youth unemployment and under-employment. While the demand for certain types of labour is met by children – who should be studying, not working – a rich labour market supply of young people remains unemployed or underutilized. The linkages between child labour, the Millennium Development Goal of education for all and youth employment are also critical; a child without basic and skills is more likely to become an un- or underemployed youth, to remain strapped in the poverty cycle, and to not fulfil their potential to contribute to their society and economy.

Unemployment among better-educated young people is particularly high; this apparent paradox is partly explained by economic development not always keeping pace with improved education, demographics, and mismatches between the skills taught and those required by employers. But the consequences are far-reaching, hampering the ability of companies and countries to develop competitive advantages.

One aspect of the youth employment challenge is closely connected with more general issues not related to age, concerning the quantity and quality of employment in a country. Unless productive employment is at the heart of macroeconomic and social policies and aggregate demand for labour is expanding, it is not possible to have successful programmes to integrate disadvantaged young people into the labour market. On the other hand, the youth labour market has its own particular and problematic dimensions. It's not simply that young workers share the adverse affects felt by all workers when the labour market is tight; their share of these effects is disproportionately severe.

Key Statistics

- ◆ Asia-Pacific has more than 45 per cent of the world's young people (15 to 24-year-olds) without work. In 2005, 39.2 million young people in Asia were unemployed.
- ◆ In 2005 this group made up 20.3 per cent of the labour force but accounted for nearly half (47.7 per cent) of the region's jobless.
- ◆ Within the region, South Asia has the largest number of unemployed youth, almost 16.3 million (11.3 per cent) in 2005. In East Asia it was 11.7 million (7.8 per cent). However in the last decade it is South-East Asia and the Pacific that has experienced the worst relative change – youth unemployment more than doubled, from over 5.5 million (9.7 per cent) in 1995 to nearly 10.4 million (16.9 per cent) in 2005.
- ◆ In East Asia a young person's risk of being unemployed was 2.7 times as high as that of adults in 2005. In South Asia the figure was 3.7 times. In South-East Asia and the Pacific, the ratio increased from 4.9 to 5.6 between 1995 and 2005, meaning this sub region now has the highest ratio of youth to adult unemployment rates in the world.
- ◆ Unemployment among educated youth is particularly high. In Sri Lanka the proportion of the unemployed with 13 years or more of education increased from 15.4 per cent in 1990 to 29 per cent in 2003.
- ◆ The ILO estimates that halving youth unemployment would increase GDP by between 1.5 and 2.5 per cent in East Asia, between 4.6 and 7.4 per cent in South-East Asia and the Pacific, between 4.2 and 6.7 per cent in South Asia, and 7.1 and 11.4 per cent in West Asia (2004 figures).
- ◆ In South Asia, South-East Asia and the Pacific the unemployment rate for young women is higher than for young men. However in East Asia the rate is lower (6.2 per cent, down from 9.2 per cent in 2005). The same is true in the developed (industrialized) economies in Asia and the Pacific; the youth male unemployment rate is 10 per cent and the female rate 8.2 per cent.

Education is the first step towards decent work and productive and responsible lives for young people. Most Asian countries have made significant progress towards the goal of universal primary education but investment is needed to further boost basic education for young people, especially young women, ethnic minorities, people with disabilities and other disadvantaged groups. It is not just the level but the quality and relevance of education and training that is important.

Asian countries have developed specific initiatives to help young people bridge the gap between school and the labour market. Labour market information, job search techniques and career guidance are increasingly crucial and can play an important role in identifying and tailoring employment and training opportunities and helping young people make realistic choices.

Active labour market policies and programmes have increasingly been applied to improve the integration of young jobseekers and the underemployed into the labour market. They complement rather than replace macroeconomic policies and, if properly designed and implemented can target the most disadvantaged young people.

Public works and community services have been used by many Asian governments. Although these do not offer long-term employment solutions, they can increase the productivity of low-skilled workers, as well as helping young participants integrate into the labour market.

Of the Millennium generation – the young people who are entering the labour force for the first time this century – 60 per cent live in Asia. The stakes – social as well as economic – for the countries of the region are high.

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Role of the ILO

The ILO, with its tripartite constituency and global alliances, can be a catalyst for action on youth employment. At the national level, governments, along with employers' and workers' organizations, are major players in the development of youth employment policies and programmes. At the international level the ILO's leading role in the UN Secretary-General's Youth Employment Network (YEN) – a global partnership of the World Bank, the United Nations and the ILO – provides a major opportunity to build international consensus and influence the international agenda with a comprehensive strategy for the employment and social inclusion of young people.

The ILO's programme on youth employment operates through a global network of technical specialists at its headquarters in Geneva and in more than 60 offices around the world. It helps countries to develop coherent and coordinated interventions on youth employment. Such work includes:

- ◆ Data collection on the nature and dimensions of youth employment, unemployment and underemployment;
- ◆ Analysis of the effectiveness of country policies and programmes, technical assistance in forming and implementing plans of action on youth employment, and the development of tools and training materials;
- ◆ Policy advice to strengthen in-country labour market policies and programmes for youth employment, and capacity building for governments, employers' and workers' organizations;
- ◆ Advocacy and awareness-raising activities to promote decent work for youth with a focus on employability, employment and workers' rights;
- ◆ Establishment of strategic private-public partnerships on youth employment at international, sub-regional and national levels;
- ◆ Promotion of inter-country and global peer networks linking ILO constituents and other stakeholders, to support better performance and share good-practices;
- ◆ Collaboration with multilateral and other international institutions to that national level policies and initiatives affecting youth employment are coherent.