

The role of institutional arrangements for youth employment and empowerment in Sierra Leone

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Youth is defined in Sierra Leone as people aged from 15 to 35 (Government of Sierra Leone 2003). They account for about 34 per cent of the total population. More than 80 per cent of the country's youth population lives on less than USD2 per day. Sixty per cent of young Sierra Leoneans are believed to be structurally unemployed (National Youth Commission of Sierra Leone and UNDP 2012)—as a result of poverty, the weak private sector as a legacy of the civil war, the low level of coordination to create employment opportunities in the country and the mismatch between the skills demanded by the private sector and those provided by the education system.

Moreover, the 11-year civil war greatly disrupted the availability and quality of livelihood opportunities. As a result, members of this generation have fewer employable skills, are less prepared for the job market and face a more difficult transition to adulthood than either younger or older groups of the population. Recognising this fact, the Government of Sierra Leone has considered youth employment central to its Agenda for Change (2008–2012) and the Agenda for Prosperity (2013–2017) (National Youth Commission of Sierra Leone and UNDP 2013).

Employment is a structural issue, and there are no quick, sustainable solutions that will reach the majority considered to be underemployed or unemployed. Employment requires long-term, equitable growth across sectors and regions. Nevertheless, there are proven good practices, which can be expanded; existing opportunities can lead to many others if there are better linkages between sectors and initiatives, a much more supportive policy environment and targeted interventions based on detailed assessments. This is why addressing youth unemployment in a post-conflict setting such as Sierra Leone requires an appropriate institutional framework.

In December 2009, the Government of Sierra Leone established a National Youth Commission responsible for: implementing, coordinating and monitoring development programmes aimed at creating employment opportunities for the youth; developing a comprehensive national youth development plan; collaborating with other government agencies and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) on youth skills training; addressing youth drug abuse; disseminating information on services for the youth; and coordinating the activities of youth groups and youth-serving organisations.

In 2013, the new Ministry of Youth Affairs was established to spearhead the development of appropriate policies and programmes to enhance and promote development activities nationwide. It provides support and oversight for the National Youth Commission. It is also expected to work in tandem with the Ministry of Labour and Social Security, which is responsible for developing policies and managing programmes related to employment, social security and industrial relations. The current coordination structure within the youth employment sector comprises the following groups:

- the partner group: the main agencies that support the Government of Sierra Leone on employment issues (such as the United Nations, World Bank, European Commission, German Development Cooperation (GIZ) and the International Fund for Agricultural Development), providing support to studies and new project interventions and to jointly develop lessons learned;
- the youth employment strategy group: senior officers of Ministerial Development Authorities and directors of large NGOs, supporting the development of policy, coherence, synergies and strategic planning between projects, and the adoption of lessons learned;
- the technical working group: field-level implementers who share practical experiences on implementation;
- district youth advisory committees: structures established within the local district councils in an attempt to decentralise coordination of youth employment; and

- regional, district and chiefdom youth councils: ensure local youth representation, they serve as the link between the Commission and local communities.

Key achievements

Six business development centres that are helping to develop entrepreneurship have been established in different parts of the country. They are also facilitating youth-led livelihood development activities through agribusiness and value chain promotion. Furthermore, five career advisory and placement service centres are assisting thousands of university students in the development of their careers. On average, about 500 youth are receiving IT and business development training annually from the Obasanjo skills acquisition centre. The national graduates internship programme is also increasing the employability skills of recent tertiary-level graduates. Institutional capacity development activities are also playing a pivotal role in coordinating the youth development efforts of the country.

Lessons learned

The following are some of the best practices that could be identified from the development activities:

- the shift of the intervention approach from strictly 'socially oriented' to an added mix of 'demand-driven/business-oriented', avoiding market saturation in a limited formal private sector;
- increasing the limited knowledge of the youth on running capital vs. profitability;
- business development services are essential to support the development of entrepreneurship;
- agricultural support programmes should cover a minimum of two agricultural cycles with agricultural inputs and the development of value chains;
- local market surveys have to be conducted regularly and systematically to establish the information-sharing network of local business opportunities;
- projects need to link youth into a network, and also have to play a facilitating role between the youth and the idea of business;
- most projects are more effective when there is good social organisation, normally in the form of pre-existing natural groups;
- developing life skills is essential; and
- there must be a proper coaching and mentorship structure to enable the establishment of small and medium-sized enterprises.

Therefore, the establishment of an integrated, systematic institutional approach along with the formulation of youth-friendly systems, frameworks and structures can help to coordinate youth development efforts.

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