

Transitions from school to decent work

Introducing the ILO's Work4Youth Programme

Sara Elder

Work is central to young adults' well-being. As well as providing income, work can lead to broader social and economic advancement, strengthening individuals, their families and communities. Such progress, however, assumes that work is decent. 'Decent Work' – a central concept of the International Labour Organization's tripartite constituency of governments, employers and workers – sums up the aspirations of people in their working lives.



Why is it so difficult for young people to attain decent work? Motivation behind the Work4Youth Programme

In July 2011, the International Labour Organization (ILO) entered into an exciting partnership with the MasterCard Foundation. The main objective of the US\$15 million Work4Youth (W4Y) Programme is to answer the above question and to find practical ways to expand decent work opportunities for young men and women.

Young men and women today face increasing uncertainty in their hopes of undergoing a satisfactory transition in the labour market, and this uncertainty and disillusionment can, in turn, have damaging effects on individuals, communities, economies and society at large. Unemployed or underemployed youth are less able to contribute effectively to national development and have fewer opportunities to exercise their rights as citizens. They have less to spend as consumers, less to invest as savers and often have no 'voice' to bring about change in their lives and communities. Widespread youth unemployment and underemployment also prevents companies and countries from innovating and developing competitive advantages based on human capital investment, thus undermining future prospects.

Knowing the costs of inaction, many governments around the world do prioritise the issue of youth employment and attempt to develop reactive policies and programmes¹. But are such stop-gap policies and their levels of implementation effective? Apparently not, since recent ILO statistics report large increases in youth unemployment in many countries, and stagnancy in the global 28 per cent share of young people who do work but remain trapped in extreme poverty (measured at the level of US\$1.25 a day).

What approaches are effective when it comes to improving the number of successful transitions and in shortening the length of those transitions? The international community remains unable to answer these questions with clarity. The W4Y Programme hopes to address these shortcomings and provide an extensive knowledge base, including statistics, on the school-to-work transitions of young people, as well as some practical experience of working with countries, with tangible (and measurable) results at the end of the Programme's five-year tenure.

The Work4Youth Programme in operation

The W4Y Programme has three major components:

1. Expanding the global knowledge base

W4Y aims to utilise a standardised knowledge-gathering methodology to provide the necessary level of detail for policy-makers to fully understand the specific barriers in the country. It will capitalise on the ILO's application of a unique school-to-work transition concept (see Box 1), as outlined in the ILO's school-to-work transition survey (SWTS) methodological framework².

Action plan:

- a. Surveys from 28 countries in five global regions will produce a series of comprehensive and analytical national, regional and global reports on youth employment. The SWTS will be run twice in the 28 countries over a five-year period.
- b. The Programme will create global databases that will be widely available to UN and bilateral agencies, international organisations, government ministries, policy-makers, employers, foundations, academia and young people.
- c. The Programme will build up a library of publications based on the SWTS results, including 28 country reports (56 national reports in total), regional reports that summarise transition issues across the five countries in the regions (ten regional reports in total), five thematic reports (for example, on the links between child labour and youth employment), two global reports – the next two editions of the ILO flagship report *Global Employment Trends for Youth* – and, finally, a report on

Box 1

School-to-work transition indicators are designed to measure the ease or difficulty with which young people are able to access decent work; for example, the progression of a young person from the end of schooling to the first 'career' job, or 'regular' job with decent work characteristics. The school-to-work transition survey (SWTS) was developed to identify three major segments of the youth population – the young person who had 'not yet started' the transition; the young person who was 'in transition'; and the one who had 'transited' to decent work – and to determine the characteristics and determinants of each segment.

The stage 'transition not started' includes all survey respondents who are still in school or currently inactive and not in school, and who have no intention of either working or looking for work. The stage 'in transition' comprises youth who are unemployed, or employed and planning to change jobs or return to education – for example, people in a non-career job; those employed but exposed to decent work deficits (measured in terms of job satisfaction and type of contract); and those currently inactive or not in school, but aiming to work later on and are looking for a job. Finally, the 'transited' stage includes young people actively employed in a career job, with no plan to change or to return to education, as well as those enjoying decent work, measured in terms of type of contract.

progress towards the Millennium Development Goal (MDG) of providing decent and productive employment for young people.

The implementation of SWTS in 28 countries will cover approximately 120,000 young people (average sample size of 4,800 young men and women per country), while the results will be widely disseminated within the country. The 28 participating countries will have improved youth labour market information and improved technical capacity of partnering institutions (for example, central statistical offices) for replicating the SWTS. The establishment of such a large pool of evidence will constitute an incentive for other countries to undertake similar surveys.

2. National strategies for promoting more and better jobs for young people

The experience from the implementation of prior school-to-work transition surveys has shown that they can provide a solid basis for the formulation of youth employment policies and programmes. For instance, the survey in Kyrgyzstan served to integrate youth employment policy interventions in the country's National

Box 2

Key findings from past school-to-work transition surveys

A recent synthesis of survey results from eight countries has shown that:

- More than two-thirds of unemployed youth in Egypt and Nepal would consider emigrating for employment purposes. The proportions in the other countries – Azerbaijan, China, Islamic Republic of Iran and Mongolia – averaged around 40 per cent.
- Those with higher education are not guaranteed an easier transition from school to work. On average, the time between the departure from school to attainment of a fixed-term and/or satisfactory job (for the transited youth) was 29 months for an Egyptian youth. The transition periods were longer for young men than women (32 versus 20 months, respectively) and were progressively shorter given the increasing education level of the youth (96 months for youth with primary education versus 19 months for those with a university degree). But even then, the Egyptian youth with higher education remained in transition 33 months after graduation.
- The expected relationship between hours of work and earnings is an upward sloping curve. However, no such obvious relationships were observed for young people in the available survey data. Only in Azerbaijan and Egypt was the relationship positive, while in the other countries there were no obvious relationships. Assuming the findings are accurate, the indication is that no matter how long the youth worked, their total earnings at the end of the month did not change considerably. It is likely that a significant proportion of young people were engaged in low-productivity work, taken up as the only option to earning some income.

Employment Programme. In Egypt, Kosovo, Indonesia, Mongolia and Sri Lanka, the findings of the survey were used for the design of national action plans on youth employment and for assigning priority to youth employment in national policy-making.

Action plan:

The ILO will work through its tripartite constituency, bringing together governments, workers' and employers' groups in 28 countries to discuss the mix of policies and programmes needed to ease the transition to decent employment for young men and women in each country, and to build a roadmap for implementation. National workshops will be held in each country upon the release of the survey data and report. Another promising potential of the national workshops is to bring together private donors and servicing organisations. If a need is identified for a programme on increasing financial literacy among rural youth, for example, then the W4Y organisers could locate potential service providers and put them in contact with private companies or foundations that are interested in financing the promotion of youth employment.

Box 3

Lessons learned from implementing school-to-work transition surveys

A participatory approach allows national partners to shape the process and identify key topics to be researched. Such an approach increases the likelihood that the information generated is used not only for the design of youth employment policies, but also for mainstreaming youth employment in national development and employment frameworks.

The survey permits the gathering of youth employment and enterprise data at a relatively low cost in countries where there is no labour force or establishment survey programme. It is a useful tool for expanding labour market information where it is currently scarce.

The SWTS generates considerable policy and research interest, and creates additional demand for youth employment and establishment data. In Kosovo, for instance, the figures on informality stemming from the survey led national authorities to launch a specific survey on young workers in the informal economy. In Serbia, the data on the mismatch between the skills possessed by young people and those demanded by employers led to the design and implementation of establishment surveys on occupations and skills, to inform the design of training programmes and work experience schemes.

Finally, there is interest in the community of experts on labour market statistics to further test the SWTS concepts and methodologies for possible future development of an international standard.

3. A global communications campaign for youth employment issues, key policy messages and good practice

The communications strategy will follow a two-pronged approach:

1. A series of social marketing events of global reach that will uphold the need for investing in increased decent work opportunities for young people and disseminate information and results stemming from the work on the global products.
2. Communication initiatives targeting at least five countries where SWTS will be implemented. The specific aim of the latter approach is to support the creation of an enabling environment whereby policy-makers are brought on board from the onset of the SWTS initiative.

Conclusion

For many commentators, only long-term structural interventions – dealing with trade, debt and other macro policy areas – can ensure sustainable economic development that young people can drive and benefit from. Growth alone is not enough. Self-employment through isolated enterprise programmes is not enough. Youth employment has to be mainstreamed into national economic and employment strategy. As such, a whole range of ministries and partners need to be involved – and when it comes to school-to-work transitions, this includes ministries of education. The ILO-MasterCard Foundation Work4Youth Programme is a promising way forward, and I encourage all stakeholders to learn more and get in touch via our website: www.ilo.org/youth

Endnotes

- 1 See, for example, the inventory of crisis-response programmes and policies put in place by countries at ILO (2010). *Global Employment Trends for Youth: Special issue on the impact of the global economic crisis on youth*, August 2010, Geneva.
- 2 See S. Elder (2009), *ILO school-to-work transition survey: A methodological guide*, ILO, Geneva.

Sara Elder, an economist at the International Labour Organization (ILO), serves as Senior Research Specialist on the Work4Youth Programme. She is the principal author of the ILO *Global Employment Trends for Youth, Key Indicators of the Labour Market* (currently in its seventh edition) and was a lead speaker at the Commonwealth Conference on Investing in Youth Employment, 2011.

Based in Toronto, Canada, the **MasterCard Foundation** advances micro-finance and youth learning with committed partners in 45 developing countries.