

Policy and Practice Note

Youth Skills Development and Employment

East London IDZ

23-24 August 2016

On the 23 and 24 August 2016, The Economies of Regions Learning Network and the Jobs Fund, in association with REDIX3 and the Poverty and Inequality Initiative (University of Cape Town), hosted a two-day workshop on approaches to youth skills development and job creation.

Purpose of event

The purpose of the event was:

- To highlight the challenges of the youth skills and employment challenge for regional economic stakeholders;
- To showcase positive examples of regional partnership action;
- To inspire regional stakeholders to develop innovative regional collaborations to address the challenge of youth skills development and employment; and
- To identify the support cities and region require from national government and from research agencies to engage more effectively around youth skills and employment.

The event was attended by 50 different organisations and entities, ranging from TVET colleges to national departments, and from local government and youth organisations to national NPOs active in the field. The resulting inputs and discussions unpacked what is working and what can be done practically at regional, city and local level.

Youth unemployment is a complex multi-dimensional challenge. Although it has global and national dimensions, it is also strongly regional in character and requires regional and local interventions that supplement national approaches. This regional dimension is reflected in the distinct regional variations in youth unemployment rates in different regions observed internationally and in South Africa. This follows logically from the reality that regional economies differ and are affected unevenly by economic trends.

Youth unemployment strategies thus need to be tailored to fit the unique character of the regional economy. A youth employment strategy for a declining manufacturing region will be different to that of a booming hi-tech hub. It is thus not surprising that a portfolio of provincial youth unemployment initiatives have emerged in the different provinces in addition to those pursued by national government. Any strategy will also need to acknowledge that youth is not homogeneous and will need to take into account the situation of different categories of youth in terms of education, family income and so on.

The discussions at the event confirmed the importance of the local and regional levels in tackling youth skills and employment challenges. What follows are some key insights emerging from the event. The presentations and inputs made at the event can be found on the ERLN website (<http://www.erln.org.za/erln-learning-events/past-events/eventdetail/46/-/youth-skills-development-and-employment-creation>).

Insights from the event

The 15 ways we can succeed in addressing the youth skills development and employment challenge in South Africa.

1. Get the basics right

The basic education system is failing to adequately equip youth. Lincoln Meyer from Wilderness Foundation stressed how youth coming into his programme were often unable to adequately read or write. This view was echoed by others working in the youth sector. This is a fundamental and basic building block, and without adequate education, youth from poor and disadvantaged backgrounds are further excluded. Youth from poor backgrounds are also often subject to psycho-social abuse in various forms, which further undermines their resilience and self-esteem.

2. Supply appropriate skills to the market

There was an acknowledgement that the Sector Education and Training Associations (SETAs) are not working. Their insistence on only recognising accredited programmes, along with their inflexibility in aligning and adapting these to industry needs means that many valuable initiatives do not get supported.

Whilst both the basic education system and SETA systems are critical issues to be addressed, this is not going to change in the short term. Programmes targeting youth thus need to be geared towards equipping youth for work.

3. Recognise that there is no magic bullet

There is no single approach or intervention that is sufficient on its own. Multi-pronged, complementary and detailed programmes grounded in the demands and reality of the local context are necessary. In a nutshell, “Multi-pronged and -layered, localised, geographically and sectorally focused, demand-led, age and gender specific”.

These aspects were unpacked further in the workshop.

4. Use demand-led approaches

The Harambee programme has built its success on its ability to successfully place youth on the basis of working with potential employers to understand their recruitment needs. Using a series of sophisticated approaches and methodologies it then recruits, streamlines and trains youth with a specific employer in mind. The importance of understanding the needs of employers and developing matching programmes was emphasised repeatedly as a critical component of these types of recruitment and placement programmes.

5. View the sector as a useful frame for skills development and intermediation

It was noted that company specific training tended to be too narrow in its focus while training linked to broad job categories (such as electrical technician) tended to be too broad. It was suggested that

the sector was probably the most useful frame for defining such demand-led training efforts. Engagement with sector representative bodies and companies in the sector should be undertaken.

6. Adopt localised and partnership approaches using the city or region as an enabling platform for coordination and customisation

The Harambee programme in partnership with the City of Johannesburg highlights the significance of locally developed programmes, based on a partnership approach that plays to its strengths and abilities of the partners. The City of Johannesburg and Harambee have developed a municipal model that addresses youth unemployment. The demand-led model seeks to facilitate collaboration between the City, communities and the private sector to create efficient opportunity pathways for youth at scale.

It is at the local level that these partnerships can be formed around specific programmes based on local needs and realities. The responsiveness at a local level allows municipalities to unlock barriers to employment and to quickly respond to the demands of the labour market for the absorption of excluded youth.

7. Recognise that executive leadership and championing is an important success factor

In the City of Johannesburg, Jak Koseff specifically acknowledged that the location of the programme in the Executive Mayor's office enabled it to build a cross-departmental strategy and leverage commitment towards the programme.

8. Utilise Public Employment Programmes as a necessary plan B

Market-based strategies for employment creation are going to take time to work. But employment itself is too important in people's lives and sense of value to leave to the market. We need to have a plan B. This was the message from Dr Kate Philip, who highlighted that although Public Employment Programmes shouldn't be our plan A, they are a necessary plan B.

Unemployment has a massive social impact. We therefore cannot assess public employment on the basis of people moving into other jobs – especially if the economy is not creating employment. Public employment can unlock the social value of labour. Globally – the future of work is not good and the economy is changing also. This is reducing employment with huge consequences for society. Forms of public employment need to be continuous and absorb the productive potential of people in society. This is not a solution in its own right, but part of a multi-dimensional strategy to resolve societal challenges. We therefore need to ensure we do not measure PEPs against things they cannot do.

To unlock the agency of people not included in the economy we need to start looking at Public Employment Programmes in a different way. In this respect, Community Works Programmes offer a real means to build social capital and cohesion. They are long-term, offering people specific employment for two days per week on the basis of needs defined by the community – be it public art, home-based care or even home maintenance – in fact the programme allows for multiple partnerships and opportunities.

9. Execute rapidly, fail fast and scale for success

The City of Johannesburg's experience illustrates the importance of trying small projects that can happen relatively quickly, trying different approaches, tweaking and improving as they move along, and dropping programmes that do not work. Instead of trying to design grand programmes that risk

complete failure if untested, rather try small things that can be rapidly scaled and improved over time.

10. Recognise the importance of collecting, analysing and understanding data

The Harambee experience shows how important it is to monitor performance and to understand what is happening in the market-place as well as in the implementation of programmes. This information is used to improve the programme and refine the aspects that are working.

11. Use the clearing house approach to match job seekers and with job opportunities

The clearing house approach refers to a system of matching unemployed (supply) to demand (opportunities). Such a concept is currently being tested in Johannesburg with Harambee. Given the importance of gearing support programmes to demand, such a mechanism would conceptually form the basis for locally curated and geared programmes.

12. Enable intermediaries to play an important role

Intermediaries have an important role to play. Experimentation and trying things out is important. When monies are awarded to intermediaries to play a role, there is also need to checks for implementation ability, success in the field/track record and to do rigorous selection.

13. Remember that the person matters

It is important to pay attention to the person – as much as to the skill or work opportunity. Given our history and poverty, the social and psychological damage to youth and kids translates into a lack of emotional resilience and understanding of the work-place culture and practice. They need to be supported to understand the workplace and how to succeed in it. The University of Cape Town's South African Child Gauge 2015, recognises that youth need to be taken seriously as legitimate stakeholders in society and promotes support such as mentorship, career guidance, skills development programmes and access to sporting and cultural activities.

14. Take an all-of-government approach

It was noted that an all-of-government approach was required given the complex multi-jurisdictional nature of the youth employment challenge. Going forward, it was suggested that a range of other government stakeholders including the national departments of Labour, Social Development, Basic Education and Higher Education as well as the National Youth Development Agency needed to be included in the conversation going forward.

15. Generate partnerships between government, business, labour and academia for better results

The Mercedes Benz skills academy site visit demonstrated that when government, business and labour work together, there can be benefits for all the stakeholders. Research bodies have an important role to play in bringing an evidence base and analytical insights.