

How to increase youth employment in West Africa?

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The second debate of 2016 was about youth employment in West Africa. WATHI 5 presents five recommendations to guide the collective action of decision-makers and citizens in order to reduce youth unemployment in the region today and in the future.

AVENUES FOR ACTION

- 1** Make the creation of a maximum number of jobs a strategic priority of government action. This means integrating this objective in the formulation of all public policies including the integration of criteria for job creation and internships in the evaluation of bid submissions for public procurement; fiscal policies that encourage the creation of salaried employments and recruitment of interns; realistic policies of targeted industrial development and the development of transparent national internship programs in the public and parapublic sector.
- 2** Boost massive job creation for young people in agriculture, livestock farming and related industries and services through a voluntarist policy that will combine the creation of land-rental markets; the creation of public services in charge of popularizing agriculture; the creation of branches devoted to creating employment opportunities in rural areas within the institutions in charge of promoting employment; the integration in the school curricula of activities to educate on agriculture and livestock farming; support to innovative entrepreneurship projects in rural areas, including to recreational activities essential for youth.
- 3** Address the issue of low employability of the youth, graduates or not of secondary or higher education, by urgently and consistently integrating in the school curricula, from preschool to higher education, workshops to develop core career and life skills and by putting in place in public universities, in partnership with the private sector, centers offering students trainings on job search techniques and information on the labor market and institutions that support entrepreneurship.
- 4** Review the labor codes and all labor legislations in the countries of the region, to undertake reforms that will equally focus on making job creation easier and protecting workers' rights, including through the introduction of new types of employment contracts adapted to the local economy; through the introduction of part-time employment contracts designed for students, and through the simplification of procedures in the public agencies in charge of ensuring the respect for labor legislation.
- 5** Invest public resources at the national and regional level, with the support of regional organizations for economic integration, in improving the gathering of reliable statistics on regional and national labor markets; and by launching a multidisciplinary research program on youth employment throughout the West African region, in partnership with universities, research institutions and private sector actors.

IMPLEMENTATION STRATEGY

To go beyond recommendations and take concrete action requires:

- ✔ **To clarify the responsibility of the various players of society in decision-making on youth employment.** Even though there is almost a consensus to remind that companies in the private sector rather than governments are responsible for creating jobs, we should not be mistaken about the primary responsibility of governments in the creation of political, institutional, economic, educational and sociocultural frameworks conducive to massive job-creating economic growth.

It is the responsibility of governments, parliaments and other public institutions to take action when it comes to putting fiscal policies, industrial policies or education and training policies at the service of youth employment. Advocacy for reforms and pressure from public opinion should be directed at them.

- ✔ **To create in each country and at the regional level civil society coalitions as broad as possible to make the issue of youth employment a permanent strategic priority.** Although it is already an issue today, it will only show its full scope in the two to five decades to come, when the youth population in the region will have exploded given the demographic growth and the current population structure.

The beneficiaries of better public policies for employment are the millions of young people unemployed or underemployed today, young people who are still in the education system from kindergarten to university, and the coming millions of children we will need to educate, train and insert them into professional life. It is precisely beneficiaries who are hardly represented in bodies where public policies are formulated.

New coalitions of civil society must integrate all categories of potential beneficiaries of better employment policies that can be mobilized, especially the millions of young people who «get by» in countless activities in the informal sector and students who still run behind degrees that open the door of unemployment and dependence. The debate on youth employment cannot leave out the main concerned.

- ✔ **Not to evade the hardest questions to be able to make decisions and stick to them in the long run.** If all political and social actors in the countries of the region have agreed to prioritize action in favor of youth employment, there is little chance that they all agree on the means and the reforms to be implemented.

At least two questions deserve to be put on the table, the reform of labor codes for greater flexibility to give a minimum of rights to the vast majority of workers in the informal sector who are not covered by labor laws. This is certainly a sensitive issue as far as key partners such as labor unions are concerned.

The second question is the reform of education and training systems. This should be subject to debates and to clear decisions free from political changes at the head of states. Everything indicates that major choices must be made in terms of curricula content at all levels, from preschool to higher education. The reforms involve immediate costs, and therefore important sacrifices for some actors of the education systems, educators but also students.

That is why it is essential that all categories of social actors grasp the inseparable stakes of national economic policy, employment and education and take these debates out of the partisan political spaces where only the vote of young people in elections matters.

The fight against youth unemployment and under-employment in West Africa, Central Africa and throughout the continent should not be considered a priority only because the world is at war against terrorism and young people are seen everywhere as the main vectors of violent extremism, radicalization, and ultimately, terrorism.

Job creation for youth today and tomorrow is a fundamental requirement for all the countries of the WATHI zone as the collective wellbeing of current and future populations depends on it. WATHI has chosen this theme for its debate because its purpose is to provoke an open and deep reflection on the most important structural issues the West African region is facing. The views, analyses, avenues for action highlighted do not put an end to the debate. Their objective is to install it in the citizen public space.

You can send your comments, reactions, recommendations to refine the proposals and the means to implement them to the following address: ledebat@wathi.org

WATHI

WATHI, the West Africa citizen think tank, is a participative and multidisciplinary think tank which aims to contribute to the sharing of knowledge and the production of ideas on the crucial political, economic, social and cultural issues for the present and the future of the countries of West Africa.

The geographical area of WATHI includes 15 countries of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) as well as Cameroon, Chad and Mauritania. Freely inspired by «waati», which means «time» in Bamanankan language of Mali, WATHI expresses both the urgency of a collective mobilization and the need for long-term commitment.



CONTACT US

General inquiries:
infowathi@wathi.org

Le débat de WATHI:
ledebat@wathi.org

Support WATHI :
donate@wathi.org

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