TACKLING YOUTH UNEMPLOYMENT IN

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Overview

As a growing dimension of the global jobs crisis, the world is currently experiencing a global youth employment crisis. According to the International Labour Organization (ILO), over 75 million youth worldwide are expected to be unemployed in 2012, 4 million more than in 2007; global youth unemployment rates are projected to remain sticky at its high rate of 12.7% up to 2016; and over 6 million have given up looking for jobs. The issue of decent work for youth has also been placed centrally in discussions at the international, regional and national levels. In Trinidad and Tobago, although the youth unemployment rate has shown recovery in 2011, youth labour force participation rates have been falling. Although a number of discussions, initiatives and commitments are underway at the national, regional and global levels to address the global employment crisis, there is need for more intense and expeditious action to be taken at all levels to create and maintain decent work for youth, safeguard social, economic and political stability, accelerate a jobs-rich recovery from the global economic and financial crisis and prevent a recurrence of such a crisis.
Introduction

Currently comprising almost half of the world’s population, the present and potential value of youth towards economic and social development cannot be understated. The number of persons aged 15 to 24 years currently numbers 1.2 billion and has been growing over the past decade. Noted for their hope, ambition, commitment, creativity and capacity for innovation, young persons are often seen as “the future” or “tomorrow’s leaders”. However, there is increasing recognition that young people are not only the future but an integral part of the present; not only beneficiaries but are partners in development. The theme of International Youth Day 2012 (August 12th) of “Building a better world: Partnering with youth” attests to this shift in development thought.

According to the International Labour Organization (ILO) over 75 million youth aged 15 to 24 years are projected to be unemployed in 2012 and the global youth unemployment rate, which currently stands at 12.7 percent, is expected to show no improvements up to 2016.

Over the years, youth unemployment has been regarded as an important policy concern in many countries.

This Paper examines actions taken at the regional level and in Trinidad and Tobago.
Defining Youth

Generally, based on research, a youth could be as old as 35 years (the maximum) and as young as 12 years (the minimum). However, for the purpose of this presentation, youth is defined as persons aged 15 to 24.

Analysis of Youth in the Labour Market - Regional

In the Caribbean steps have been taken in the region to deepen regional integration with the establishment of the CARICOM Single Market and Economy (CSME) which was initially implemented on January 1, 2006 with the introduction of the Single Market phase. The CSME is predicated on a strong sense of commitment to the goals of regional integration and on a belief in the ability of the region to fulfill one’s dreams and aspirations.¹ The youth is identified as one of the major category of beneficiaries from the CSME as it is intended to afford free movement within the CARICOM region for work, establishment of businesses and investment purposes. To date, certain categories of persons, including university graduates and artisans, benefit from free movement of skills. This will make it easier for youth to access educational opportunities not available at home and respond to labour and skill shortages in other countries.
Youth in the Labour Market in Trinidad and Tobago

The population of Trinidad and Tobago is estimated at 1.23 million in 2012 with projections up to 1.31 million by 2015. The total labour force in Trinidad and Tobago has been relatively stable since 2004, leveling at almost half of the total population. However, since 2008, there has been a slight but steady decrease in the labour force.

The youth labour force in Trinidad and Tobago (representing persons who are willing and able to work aged 15-24 and comprising the employed and unemployed) comprised approximately one-fifth of the total labour force in 2000. In 2011, the youth labour force, which represented almost 14% of the total labour force declined by 33.6% from the year 2000.

Initiatives to Address Youth Unemployment

There have been a number of initiatives at the global, hemispheric ad international levels targeted at addressing the youth unemployment situation over the past decade. In the wake of the recent global economic and financial crisis, these efforts have been strengthened and accelerated.

Youth unemployment has been the main focus of many conferences and discussions, including at the level of the Commonwealth Heads of Government, the United Nations and
the ILO and the Summit of the Americas, in which various recommendations to combat this problem have been brought to the forefront. Some of general considerations raised at these meetings include:

- recognizing the importance of promoting pro-employment macroeconomic policies and fiscal incentives that support stronger aggregate demand and increase productive investment.

- creation of a development agenda which places jobs and decent work at the centre.

- focusing attention on education and training for young people and lifelong learning which foster a virtuous circle of improved individual employability, higher productivity, and better quality of employment, income growth and development.

- need for a greater number of internships and apprenticeship systems in a broad range of disciplines and available to all segments of the youth population, particularly those who experience the most difficulties in accessing and completing education, such as young people living in extreme poverty and in rural areas, young women and youth with disabilities;
importance of strategies to improve social protection for young people and to tailor labour market reforms to their specific needs. Decent employment is not only about generating more jobs but also about improving the quality of jobs;

critical role of youth entrepreneurship in addressing youth unemployment and promoting their empowerment.

In May 2012, the ILO convened its first Global Youth Employment Forum which brought together approximately 100 young leaders from all regions of the world to share experiences and views on the current employment situation, youth transition to decent work, and partnerships for more and better jobs for young people. The outcome of this discussion was a comprehensive framework for action, which outlines broad priorities to be addressed by Governments, the social partners and the ILO under the following areas to urgently address the youth employment crisis:

- Employment and economic policies for youth employment;
- Employability – Education, Training and Skills and School-to-Work Transition;
- Labour market policies;
- Youth entrepreneurship and self-employment; and
- Rights for young people.
**Actions to Address Youth Unemployment in Trinidad and Tobago**

Although unemployment levels in general, and youth unemployment rates in particular, in Trinidad and Tobago have been declining and may be among the lowest in the Caribbean region, the Government has placed job creation and decent work for all as one of its major priorities. With regard to youth unemployment, some of the issues of concern for Trinidad and Tobago include:

- high youth unemployment rates compared to the national unemployment rate and adult unemployment rate;
- declining youth labour force;
- higher female youth unemployment rate;
- youth underemployment;
- relatively low youth labour force participation rates; and
- youth who neither study nor work.

As noted earlier, the negative impact of the crisis on youth employment may have been worse in Trinidad and Tobago had it not been for a number of measures which were in place before the crisis and have been strengthened. New initiatives have also emerged in the post-crisis period to accelerate recovery, especially in the labour market.

Some of major initiatives pertaining to youth employment which have been implemented by Trinidad and Tobago are presented which are categorized under the areas of promoting employment, employability, entrepreneurship and equal opportunities for youth.
Government’s Policy Framework for Sustainable Development

The Policy Framework seeks to strengthen the secondary school system to ensure that students move on to further education or to productive roles in the economy and to ensure that young people are literate, numerate, and possess critical thinking skills. In addition, the framework also seeks to strategically address the issue of school dropouts at the secondary school level and the need for improved performance at the Ordinary level on a school by school basis in order to meet the tertiary education target of 60% participation. A system of entrepreneurship and apprenticeship is also encouraged.

Medium Term Policy Framework (MTPF) 2011-2014

In terms of employability for youth, the Medium Term Policy Framework focuses on improving the success rate at secondary schools and diversifying the curriculum by incorporating new ways of learning and promoting technology adaptation among youth.

National Youth Policy

The *National Youth Policy* (NYP) is a broad framework that identifies the key issues affecting young people and creates specific courses of action to address these issues. In the case of employment, the NYP focuses on the development of a Youth Employment and Employability Policy. The Youth Employment and Employability Policy will facilitate
actions including fiscal and other incentives that would encourage private sector organizations to increase their level of youth employment and create opportunities for youth in micro enterprises.

**National Business Incubation Policy**

The *National Business Incubation Policy* harnesses domestic talent and promotes the training of individuals in entrepreneurial skills in a structured fashion. The policy aims to increase employment or self-employment, including among youth, through the National Integrated Business Incubator System (IBIS).

**National Policy on Tertiary Education, Technical Vocational Education and Training (TVET) and Lifelong Learning**

The Government of Trinidad and Tobago has recognized that tertiary education, technical and vocational education and training (TVET) and lifelong learning play a pivotal role in the social, economic and cultural development of the country. Industrial development and promotes workplace readiness through the award of the Caribbean Vocational Qualification (CVQ). It emphasizes the use of science and technology to provide education and training that are relevant, without barriers posed by location and other circumstances and equitable.
Major Initiatives

**Youth Employment**

- **Operation of A National Employment Service (NES).**

- **Strengthening of the On-the-Job-Training (OJT) Programme.**

- **Hosting of First National Youth Employment Forum.**

**Youth Employability**

According to the ILO “A solid formal education, as well as effective and relevant vocational training, labour market information and services and work experience are recognized as key factors in raising employability for successful insertion in the labour market”\textsuperscript{3}. The programmes and services offered in Trinidad and Tobago to enhance youth employability are:

- **Education**

  - Reform of educational curricula from early childhood care and education to secondary school in keeping with the promotion of a ‘seamless’ system.
Free tertiary education – through the **Government Assistance for Tuition Expenses (GATE) Programme**, students are able to access tertiary education at the undergraduate level, free of charge, at both private and public tertiary level institutions (TLIs). Students pursuing post-graduate studies at public institutions are eligible for 50% of tuition costs per academic year, while those at private TLIs receive 50% of tuition up to a maximum of TT$20,000 and TT$30,000 per academic year for master’s and doctoral level degree programmes respectively. The GATE Programme has been extended to TVET education. Additionally, the **Higher Education Loan Programme (HELP)** provides a soft loan facility to students pursuing studies locally and abroad.

**Introduction of Workforce Assessment Centres** – In May 2011, the Government of Trinidad and Tobago launched the establishment of Workforce Assessment Centres. These Centres serve as skills assessment and recognition facilities designed to increase access to and participation in post secondary education and training, using a system of Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR) to assess and certify competencies gained through non-formal means.

**Wide array of Skills Development Programmes** – Trinidad and Tobago is noted for a broad range of skills development programmes, many of which are specifically targeted at youth.
Examples of Skills Development Programmes

Some Examples of Skills Development Programmes for Youth in Trinidad and Tobago are:

- **Youth Training and Employment Partnership (YTEPP) Programme** – This Programme provides training in career enhancement services, inclusive of numeracy and literacy skills, vocational skills training and entrepreneurial and attitudinal training. The programme offers training to persons 15 years and over who are out of school and unemployed.

- **Multi-Sector Skills Training (MUST) Programme** – The MUST Programme provides training in construction, hospitality and tourism for eligible citizens of Trinidad and Tobago. Construction sector trainees receive training at construction sites and on other construction-related projects.

- **Youth Apprenticeship Programme in Agriculture (YAPA)** - This Programme places young people as interns in a range of successful private and public sector agricultural enterprises to develop skills in farm management, production of crops and livestock, ornamental horticulture.
Youth Entrepreneurship

There currently exists a rich mix of policies and programmes, involving both private and public sector contribution, which has been propelling entrepreneurship in Trinidad and Tobago, with particular focus on youth in micro and small enterprises and co-operatives. These include:

(1) The establishment of the National Entrepreneurship Development Company Limited in 2002 to promote and facilitate the formation, growth and development of micro and small businesses.

(2) The introduction of a National Integrated Business Incubator System (IBIS) which is a programme developed by the Ministry of Labour and Small and Micro Enterprise Development at the end of 2011 that aims to provide a unique mix of business development support, infrastructure and operational and financial support to assist the growth and success of new and existing micro and small enterprises (MSEs).

(3) The Youth Business Trust of Trinidad and Tobago (YBTT) which is an accredited programme of Youth Business International which promotes entrepreneurship among young people between the ages of eighteen and thirty (18-30). YBTT provides loan financing as well as a mentorship programmes for young entrepreneurs.
**Equal Opportunities for Youth**

As part of its effort of promoting decent work for all, the Government of Trinidad and Tobago has been intensifying its outreach programmes aimed at educating persons on rights and responsibilities in the workplace. This is being complimented by actions aimed at strengthening the labour inspection functions to effectively enforce labour laws to protect all workers, including young persons from exploitation.

**Conclusion**

There is no contention that investment in our youth is investment in our future. In keeping with the overarching concept of sustainable development, it is mandatory that youth employment be accorded the highest priority on the agenda of the Commonwealth. Parliamentarians and those in public life play a critical role in keeping youth issues central to discussions on development and moreso sustainable development.

Additionally, it is important that the youth become actively involved in the discussions and the development, implementation and monitoring and evaluation of policies, programmes and projects. It should also be recognized that ‘youth’ is not a homogenous group and as such, consideration should be given to adapting initiatives to meet the needs of the young people. Special attention is required for those youth who may be considered ‘at-risk’ or ‘disadvantaged’ based on their geographical location, socio-economic status and
environmental conditions. This also applies to young persons living in some of the world’s poorest countries.

Further, there is a need to utilize the technologies available via the range of social media, which attract many young persons, to keep them engaged and involved in decision-making at the highest political levels and at the regional and national levels.

The 58th Commonwealth Parliamentary Conference is called upon to commit to taking urgent action to address the youth employment crisis in order to protect a generation of young people who are willing, capable and interested in contributing to national and international development.