

Career advice and placement services in Sierra Leone¹

Molla Mekonnen Alemu, University of Leicester

Approximately 70 per cent of Sierra Leone's youth population are either underemployed or unemployed, and 50 per cent are classified as either illiterate and/or unskilled. There is visible unemployment, particularly among young men. Although there have been improvements in the youth situation compared to before the civil war, many of the conditions that helped fuel the youth participation in that conflict still exist today. Large numbers of unemployed youth are a potential source of insecurity, given their vulnerability to recruitment into criminal and violent activities. Young women face high unemployment in both rural and urban areas.

Many young people's limited employment skills, work experience and low educational levels contribute to the unemployment situation. The country is also trying to recover from the effects of an 11-year-long civil war that ended in 2002, having destroyed the livelihood capabilities of the nation.

The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) Youth Employment and Empowerment Programme (YEEP) in Sierra Leone is one of the foremost youth development programmes implemented in the country. It is specifically geared towards empowering young people to participate effectively in national development processes and programmes. To achieve inclusive growth and sustainable development, the YEEP initiative aims to strengthen the youth development coordination system, policy and implementation frameworks of the Ministry of Youth Affairs (MoYA) and the National Youth Commission (NAYCOM), leading to better coordination, oversight and strategic leadership of the national youth development institutions.

The Career Advising and Placement Services (CAPS) programme constitutes part of the YEEP. The programme is designed to capacitate university and college students with: labour market and career development information; job-seeking skills; Information Technology training; job placement and career development workshop opportunities; organising job fairs; and fostering constructive cooperation and relationships between tertiary-level educational institutions and potential employers. Five CAPS centres were established, attached to major tertiary-level academic centres in the country—the University of Sierra Leone, Njala University and Eastern Polytechnics.

Around 4625 (2,031 female) university students have benefited from the services available at the various CAPS centres. The benefits include advice in the selection of academic subjects; finding the right career; CV and speculative letter writing; exploring job opportunities; interview skills; employment rights and responsibilities; maintaining work standards (ethical issues); building confidence and self-esteem; planning (professional time management); health and safety at work; and equality and diversity training. In addition to awareness-raising

initiatives, work is being conducted on essential 'soft skills' for the workplace, such as teamwork, communications, conflict resolution and work ethics.

Lessons learned

- Students graduating from universities are making use of CAPS advice to gain employment.
- The CAPS initiative has contributed to building the confidence, independence and creativity of young graduates.
- Embedding development initiatives into government systems and structures will help ensure the national ownership and sustainability of development endeavours.
- Young people are enthusiastic and possess the zeal and aptitude to pursue their own development. However, it is necessary for agencies such as NAYCOM and MoYA to reach out to new partners to provide resources and strategic technical advice to enhance youth development.
- There is a need to incorporate the CAPS initiative into the country's existing educational policies and systems.
- Due to the magnitude of the social and economic challenges facing young people in Sierra Leone, the CAPS programme must include the provision of social counselling services to complement the existing academic counselling.
- Expansion of the CAPS service to high schools will also help students develop their skills at a younger age.

There is a need to focus on the development and implementation of policies and interventions that increase employment skills among the youth. Strategic actions need to emphasise enhancing labour market policies, linking and defining the role of the private sector in the labour market, and analysing and finding remedial actions regarding the structural mismatch between the education sector and present labour market demand. There is also a need for tertiary-level learning institutions and training centres to adapt their curricula and strategies to the emerging needs of the labour market.

References:

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Note:

1. This One Pager is part of the report entitled 'Best Practices of YEEP in Sierra Leone'.