

Business development centres for youth-led entrepreneurship development in Sierra Leone¹

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Youth in Sierra Leone are faced with high rates of inactivity and unemployment, and poor working conditions, compounded by long hours and low pay. They also face mounting problems of poor-quality education, poor health and nutritional standards, rising rates of HIV/AIDS and mounting social development challenges, including teenage pregnancy, drug abuse, violence and crime. These were the predominant development conditions which guided the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the Government of Sierra Leone to develop and implement the Youth Employment and Empowerment Programme (YEEP). It is part of the 'Inclusive Growth and Sustainable Development' programme cluster.

This programme focuses on building the technical capacity of the Ministry of Youth Affairs (MoYA) and the National Youth Commission (NAYCOM) to facilitate policy development, internal coherence and harmonisation for a positive impact on employment creation and underemployment, and the promotion of youth empowerment and leadership development by strengthening district youth councils. The Business Development Services (BDS) programme is part of this intervention and promotes employment opportunities.

This initiative is geared towards preparing young people for self-employment by developing entrepreneurship and the employment market. Its aim is to create and expand sustainable enterprises, leading to increased employment opportunities for young people in major urban and rural centres. In 2012, five BDS Centres were inaugurated in the main urban centres of Freetown, Newton, Bo, Makeni and Kenema. They are assisting beneficiaries by helping them develop plans to start up their own businesses and develop and implement marketing information management strategies and by offering coaching and mentoring support, advisory services, information and communications technology, and business and financial management skills.

Major achievements

- The use of a business plan competition as a strategy for generating interest and maintaining motivation among beneficiaries resulted in a high level of enthusiasm among participants.
- Training of over 4,000 young people (45.5 per cent of whom were women) in entrepreneurship and business development skills (including 10 participants with disabilities).
- The creation of 938 businesses, which employ an average of three people per business (61.5 per cent headed by women).
- Five 10-acre youth farms were created in the Kenema district within the Inland Valley Swamp. Their main output is rice.
- Provision of knowledge, skills and aptitudes for beneficiaries in business development.
- Contributed tremendously to linking beneficiaries to financial institutions to enable them to access finance and credit to support the development and expansion of their businesses.
- Provided opportunities to young women from poor backgrounds, persons who are illiterate and persons with disabilities to acquire business development skills and start-up grants to enable them to set up their own businesses.
- Contributed to many community members becoming computer literate. Trainees from some Centres are providing services to schools and the wider community.

- The Centres are engaged in the implementation of comprehensive outreach activities involving radio discussions, the production and distribution of brochures, flyers and market information leaflets, and community visits.
- The Centres serve as hubs for microfinance institutions and companies operating in the target communities to recruit new clients for their services.

Lessons learned

- Strengthening the policy environment to increase access to affordable financial services for micro, small and medium-sized enterprises is important to create a favourable environment for employment and sustainable livelihoods of youth.
- Monitoring and evaluation of the projects by all stakeholders, including donors, implementers, beneficiaries and communities, is key to enable the projects to achieve their expected outcomes.
- Joint working, engagement and ownership of the key stakeholders—specifically youth—on the management boards and as part of the decision-making process and governance of projects are crucial elements for their successful implementation.
- Pooling resources to effectively deliver youth development programmes in communities and districts where they are most needed is critical to working collaboratively with development partners in the youth development sector.
- Youth can contribute to community and national development when given the opportunity to develop their full potential.
- Capacity enhancement of local staff is crucial for the successful implementation of youth development initiatives.
- Involving youth in the design of projects and programmes and the implementation of strategies yields maximum results.

When asked what they like most about the programme, beneficiaries highlighted the ease of access to the Centres and communication with the managers, the youth-friendly learning environment, the certificate received on completion of the programme, and the inspiration to 'dream big'. They claimed that their knowledge of business operations improved and that they were now empowered to participate in and run their own businesses. Thus, to enhance the sustainability of local and community economies, efforts must be made by the government and development partners to ensure that the achievements and benefits gained in the youth sector are sustained and scaled up.

Youth development approaches can have a significant impact if there are opportunities for governments and key stakeholders to link them with policy development. This will also enable the development of synergies among different sectors, which will improve young people's access to basic services. The active participation of youth in the planning, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of programmes will also lead to accountable, transparent and sustained development endeavours.

Reference:

National Youth Commission of Sierra Leone and UNDP. 2013. *Status of Youth Report*. Freetown, Sierra Leone: National Youth Commission of Sierra Leone and the United Nations Development Programme.

Note:

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