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**HOW TO INCREASE YOUTH EMPLOYMENT IN
WEST AFRICA?**

LE DÉBAT DE WATHI
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Introductory note

HOW TO INCREASE YOUTH EMPLOYMENT IN WEST AFRICA?

1. Why this theme?

- **Because** West African youth unemployment is already too high.
- **Because** West Africa is experiencing a demographic youth bulge. According to the Population Reference Bureau (<http://bit.ly/1B9NaI3>), there are over 100 million youths in West Africa, comprising one third of the population and that number is projected to increase to 218 million by 2050. There are 22.6 million young Africans who are entering the labor market every year and by 2050 that number will increase to 47 million. The young work force should offer economic opportunities for West Africa but the youth bulge comes with exceptional challenges as well.
- **Because** the economic growth of West African countries has never been stronger and parallel to this, the nature of youth employment is constantly evolving. The lack of job creation is a major constraint on economic growth. According to the African Development Bank (AfDB), African countries are among the fastest growing economies in the world in 2016 (8.5% for Côte d'Ivoire, 6.0% for Nigeria, and 5% for Senegal (<http://bit.ly/1Hu9DcT>)).
- **Because** when there are no jobs and there is no hope for a better future, youths feel hopeless and it is easier for them to fall under the siren song of violence, radicalism, and organized crime. While many violent groups are driven by ideology, lack of jobs makes it far easier to recruit new fighters. By employing youths in productive economic capacities, we not only grow our economies, but also prevent further generations from descending into violence.

- **Because** the youth of today will be the leaders of tomorrow. Even the well-educated can still find themselves stuck in dead end jobs with no prospect of using their skill sets. Good entry-level jobs give workers the training required to succeed professionally later on in life.
- **Because** lack of jobs at home encourages many youths to brave a probable death to search for employment abroad. These are often the youths who have worked in the informal sector at home. Keeping our youth in West Africa can be potentially lifesaving.
- **Because** youth unemployment is not just a problem with West Africa and that the strategies used here can be used to fight youth unemployment worldwide. High youth unemployment can be found all across the income ladder. According to the OECD, in 2013 Italy, Spain, and South Africa all had youth unemployment levels exceeding 50%. In Spain this high unemployment level led to popular protests under the Indignados (Indignant) label which morphed into the Podemos (We Can) party and is now the third largest party in the Spanish Parliament.

2. What are the main topics to be explored?

Government and Macroeconomic Factors

- Are there any structural factors in the economy leading to permanently high unemployment rates? If so, what can be done to change them?
- Are West African countries pursuing national economic growth strategies that will lead to lower youth unemployment?
- Is there a national strategy to fight youth unemployment and how can public-private partnerships be enlisted to work on that goal? What are the current public policies of job creation in the countries of the region?
- What are the actual organizations (international and national organizations) dedicated to ending youth unemployment and how effective are they, how can they better do their jobs?
- What are the sectors of the economy that are starving for workers and what can be done to orient youth towards employment in those sectors? Are there any sectors of the economy with a high youth employment rate and can governments transfer those models to other sectors?

- How can employment laws be changed to make it easier to hire younger workers?
- Are there any international factors that prohibit governments from tackling youth unemployment?
- Is the private sector following through with its role as the primary job creation engine for the economy and what policies could encourage private enterprises to do more for training and employment of the youths?

Education

- Are there any root and branch educational reforms needed to train a future generation of workers with both basic skills such as reading and writing and job specific skills that future employers will demand?
- How to bridge the divide between universities and the business community, so that universities train the skills that are required by the business community?
- Should entrepreneurship be incorporated in university curricula and if so how?

Vocational and professional training

- What are the types of vocational and professional trainings that are required to succeed in the private sector in West Africa and what changes need to be incorporated to the training and education systems?
- Can and or should the private sector have a role to play in vocational and professional training and apprenticeships?

High skilled youth employment

- What are the policy changes required so that well-educated youth can find jobs commensurate with their education levels?
- Does an emphasis on internships (paid and unpaid) help or hinder young workers seeking to enter the job market and if so what type of internships help young workers the most?

Rural versus Urban employment

- Are there differences between youth unemployment in cities and in rural areas and if so what policies can be implemented to fight rural youth unemployment?

Informal Sector

- Should employment in the informal sector be formalized and if so how?
- What are the social stigmas associated with being employed in the informal sector and how do they influence the well-being of youths employed in such a manner?

- Are there policies to support street sellers, hawkers, and other workers in the informal sector and what can the state do to further assist workers in this sector?

Cultural Factors

- Are there cultural factors leading to high youth unemployment, is there a culture of idleness?
- Are entrepreneurship and self-employment enough to reduce youth unemployment and what can be done to promote a “startup culture”?

Gender

- What are the differences between male and female youth unemployment? Why are employment opportunities more constrained for young women than for young men?
- What strategies and cultural changes can be incorporated to specifically increase the employment of young females?

3. How to participate in the debate?

- Contributions by experts in the issues discussed are welcome. So are observations, accounts, opinions, and recommendations from all citizens.
- We particularly welcome articles that refer to one or more specific countries, are based on concrete examples and include recommendations for action and reform.
- You can submit short articles (500–1000 words) or longer ones (1500–2000 words). Although the maximum length of a contribution is 2000 words, short articles are more likely to be selected and published by WATHI. All articles must be accessible to the general public, well written and structured.
- Without having to write a structured article, you can send your comments, observations, and recommendations to infowathi@wathi.org. The most relevant contributions will be published on the website.
- You can also submit a short audio or video recording to share your experiences and concrete reform proposals.
- We invite you to send your article with a 50-word biography and preferably a good picture of yourself.

CONTACTS

www.wathi.org

Please send your articles and contributions at: infowathi@wathi.org

The debate is also taking place on WATHI's Facebook and Twitter accounts:

Link to Facebook : <http://on.fb.me/1L2kOSk>

Link to Twitter : https://twitter.com/WATHI_Africa