



## A Positive Youth Development Approach to Youth Employment in the Caribbean

*By Henry Wallice Charles\**

Youth employment, remains among the more vexing development challenges for the Caribbean (Council on Hemispheric Affairs, 2013). Very much in sync with global trends, issues related to unemployment and under-employment disproportionately impact young people in the Caribbean. Though acknowledging the dearth of data on unemployment by age in the Caribbean, Parra-Torrado/World Bank (2014) contends that available data shows in most countries youth unemployment is double the rate of total unemployment. Among Caribbean countries with available data, the highest youth unemployment rates are found in Barbados, Trinidad and Tobago, Jamaica and The Bahamas where youth unemployment is about 2.4 times higher than total unemployment. According to the 2010 Survey of Living Conditions of Barbados, the youth unemployment rate was 27.6% compared to 11.1% for the entire population. In Trinidad and Tobago, the unemployment rate for youth was 12% in 2012 while the total unemployment rate was only 4.8%; and in Jamaica (2011) and Barbados (2007) it was 30.1% and 18.9% compared to a total unemployment rate of 12.7% and 7.9%, respectively. Other countries like Guyana (2011) and Dominican Republic (2007) have experienced youth unemployment rates around two times as high the total unemployment rates while Grenada (2008), St. Lucia (2010), and St Vincent and the Grenadines (2008) have experienced youth unemployment rates around 1.7 times higher than the total unemployment rate. Also, in St. Lucia 40% of the unemployed was younger than 25 years old in 2011 (Parra-Torrado/World Bank, 2014).

Further analysis of youth unemployment in the Caribbean also reveals that in most countries young females are dis-proportionately impacted and that teenagers between the 15-19 age group are five times more likely to be unemployed. Additionally, youth unemployment tends to be long term, with the average young person upon becoming unemployed usually spends more than one year before becoming active in the labour market (World Bank, 2014). We are also reminded that pervasive youth unemployment poses complex challenges for social, economic and political landscape of the Caribbean (CARICOM Commission on Youth Development, 2010; World Bank, 2003 & 2014)

Evidently, Caribbean Governments are confronted with the daunting task of crafting sustainable youth employment policies and integrated workforce development strategies Unfortunately though, too many of the policy initiatives and strategies seem ad-hoc, dis-jointed and unsustainable. Many of the schemes and initiatives, though well intentioned are informed and driven by predominantly deficit discourse and social – welfarist development perspectives (Charles, n.d.).

Indeed the time has come for Caribbean Governments to consider a positive youth development (PYD) approach to youth employment. The PYD approach is rights-based and embraces young people as strategic partners in development. It emphasizes the socio-economic right of young people to access decent work opportunities and to participate in creating and implementing sustainable employment policies and decent



work opportunities for themselves. The PYD approach accentuates the critical importance of youth driven and youth centric legislative and policy frameworks to support an enabling environment for youth employment. Central to this PYD approach, is the integration of national youth employment policies and strategies as core pillars of national macro-economic framework. Most importantly, the PYD approach supports the implementation of effective monitoring and evaluation mechanisms to facilitate equity, transparency and accountability in youth employment programmes and processes.

Perhaps as governments and other development partners consider the transition to the PYD framework they may wish to consider a few ideas and recommendations that can help set the stage for more strategic and sustainable approaches to youth employment and economic empowerment. Among these are:

- The implementation of pro-growth macro-economic and development strategies to rescue our countries from the dungeon of stagnant economic and employment growth.
- Develop and implement more effective National Education and Technical Vocational Education and Training (TVET) policies and programmes to enhance decent work opportunities for young people in the Caribbean Single Market and Economy (CSME) job market. This could involve creating better synergy between Education/TVET programmes and labour market demands. It must also include the expansion and strengthening of apprenticeship and internship programmes through enhanced collaboration with employers.
- Governments must honor obligations under ILO agreements, recommendations and conventions to facilitate decent work opportunities for young people and the establishment of National Youth Employment Policies to guide the process.
- Integrate National Youth Employment policies into macro-economic and national development policies to ensure that these development plans are employment centred.
- Develop holistic National level Youth Employment policies that facilitate the coordination of the several employment programmes and projects. In addition they must stimulate collaboration amongst the varying implementing agencies.
- Youth employment programs must be sustainable, of a high quality and more responsiveness to the needs of young people.
- Strategic partnerships are essential to enhance the relevance, quality and sustainability of existing and proposed these youth employment programmes. Consequently the strategic engagement of young people and other relevant partners in the design and implementation of such programmes are imperative.
- Sustainable Tri-Partite partnerships must be forged to enhance the quality and sustainability of youth employment interventions.
- Youth employment programs must benefit from integrated management frameworks through enhanced partnerships among, especially departments of economic planning, education, youth and labour.



- Periodic review and assessment of the operations, performance and impact of youth employment programmes is imperative to facilitate sustainability. Consequently appropriate monitoring and evaluation mechanisms must be made integral components of the youth employment policy framework.
- Special short -term employment programmes for young people are prevalent and their significance and impact should not be devalued, especially in the current economic environment. However their efficiency, effectiveness and impact must be enhanced by integrating them into national poverty reduction and/or social protection strategy; establishing appropriate mechanisms to enhance transparency, equal opportunity and facilitate continuity; involving relevant NGOs and Civil Society Agencies in the conceptualization, implementation and evaluation of these programmes, among others.
- Appropriate arrangements must be made to support continuous research on youth employment and facilitate a more constructive policy environment. This can be accomplished with strategic support from the International Labour organization, Commonwealth Secretariat, ECLAC, World Bank or similar agencies.

Finally, Governments and development stakeholders are encouraged to embrace a positive youth development and transformational perspective of youth employment. Consequently in treating with the manifestations of youth unemployment and under-employment they maybe well advised to heed the words of William Damon, 'emphasize the manifest potentialities rather than the supposed incapacities of young people.'

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