

EMPLOYMENT FOR RURAL YOUTH: CHANGE OF PRIORITIES ESSENTIAL

The youth employment challenge is universally recognised as one of the major priorities of governments and civil society. The unemployed youth is much more vulnerable to social ills than the employed youth. Whilst youth in urban areas are likely to face difficulties in securing employment, youth in rural areas are in much more dire straits when it comes to getting a job.

There are 6,5 billion people in the world today. Of these, 2,7 billion are economically active youth aged between 15 and 40. More than 52 percent of the world population, 3,5 billion, live in rural areas. The more developed countries have a rural population of 26 percent, whilst least developed countries are comprised of a 73,3 percent rural population (UN Population Division).

Besides being the majority of the world's youth, young people in rural areas are marginalised due to lack of information and their inability to communicate with the rest of the world.

Rural-Urban Migration

The natural trend has been that of youth in rural areas moving towards urban areas in search of job opportunities. This has created population pressures in urban areas, and often results in destitution when the rural youth do not find employment in the cities. They are forced to turn to crime in order to sustain themselves in the expensive and harsh realities of urban areas.

Whilst less than 30 percent of world population lived in cities in 1950, demographers predict that by 2007, more than half of the world's population will live in urban areas. This rapid global urbanisation spells further marginalisation of rural areas.

About 70 percent of the world's poor live in rural areas. Rural areas provide very limited opportunities for employment. Agriculture, often at the subsistence level, is the predominant economic activity. This is often further limited by a lack of adequate technology, irrigation and resources for large-scale commercialisation.

Mukherji (2002) criticises the microeconomic interventions made by governments in rural areas, instead of macroeconomic interventions that can result in greater employment creation:

“The government invests in the macro economy of cities and in villages it tackles only at the microeconomic level. It is time the government tackled the poverty of villages rather than the poverty of villagers. Villagers

cannot get rich so long as villages remain poor, too poor to attract modern industry and commerce. As a thumb rule, at least 80 per cent of the rural population must make a living in non-agricultural occupations.”

Mixed Priorities?

One wonders whether the current global development agenda takes into consideration the plight of rural people. For example, a number of the current development priorities such as information and communication technologies, are of little concern to rural folk. Whilst ICTs have proven to be tools for employment creation, how would that be possible in rural areas where there is no electricity and telephony system? It is the urbanites that stand to gain most from the world's current development thrusts. A global priority should be to bring the rural infrastructure into par with the urban infrastructure, thus enabling the creation of employment in rural areas. Basics such as running water, navigable roads, bridges, electricity, irrigation systems, transport systems, utilities and municipal services should be top priorities. In addition, educational opportunities in rural areas should be enhanced. More than often, colleges and universities are located in urban areas where students will be attracted to city life, hardly returning to use their education to benefit their villages.

Creating rural employment

Given the reality of rural economies being largely agricultural, the best way to create employment is to develop the agricultural economies and enhance productivity. Besides infrastructural development, training and marketing support should be given to rural farmers.

Ellis (1999) also advocates for a policy of stimulating non-farm rural employment in order to relieve population pressure on mixed farming systems, and to create a market for mixed-farm smallholders to serve, as well as to make the livelihoods of rural households more diverse and therefore more robust. The wider availability of non-farm rural employment would have the effects of smoothing seasonal variations in on-farm labour demand and income, as well as providing options more remunerative than unsustainable exploitation of the environment. Ellis asserts that policy priorities in this regard would include development of human capital through education and training, streamlining of regulations that limit rural enterprise creation, development of infrastructure and development of credit and savings institutions.

Institutions such as the Grameen Bank (<http://www.grameen-info.org>) are exemplary vehicles for addressing the rural youth employment challenge. The Grameen Bank, founded in Bangladesh, provides micro-credit to poor villagers,

especially women, for them to undertake income-generating projects. The scheme has been an internationally-renowned success with a high repayment rate, illustrating the potential that exists in empowering rural communities through provision of seed capital.

Rural youth could be involved in areas such as tourism, mining and manufacturing to ensure that they are not solely reliant on agriculture for employment.

The FAO's Youth Programmes

One of the international agencies that has been addressing the needs of rural youth is the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO). The FAO launched a programme in January 2000, Youth in Agriculture, Food Security and Sustainable Livelihoods (http://www.fao.org/sd/erp/ERP_RuralYouth_en.htm). This has three major outputs, built on recommendations from the 1995 Expert Consultation on Extension Rural Youth Programmes and Sustainable Development and subsequently influenced by the 1996 World Food Summit:

- (1) Strategic actions to promote and support rural youth development worldwide;
- (2) Building human capacity through staff development/training and information/knowledge support; and
- (3) Improving the design and delivery of rural youth development programming.

The mission of FAO's rural youth development work is to strengthen and expand young people's capacities, knowledge and skills through education and training to enable them to become productive and contributing citizens of their local communities.

Global Rural Development Action Plan

It is now imperative for the global community to develop a rural development action plan that provides a framework for achieving development in rural areas. Even the UN Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) cannot be achieved without being preceded by rural development. Urgent measures are required in order to stem rural-urban migration and to make rural areas more attractive for youth to stay in them. There should also be deliberate attempts to promote non-agricultural economic activities that will diversify rural economies.

Send your comments and suggestions to info@way.org.my

Comments on Previous Article

A number of comments were received regarding my previous article on consistency of condom use in non-marital relationships. Here are some of them:

“In some places it is so difficult to buy condoms without embarrassing yourself, so you end up doing it without,” (from SNHM, Indonesia)

“I think “love” sometimes is blind even to risk and when someone falls in love they don’t think that the partner could have any disease like this. Love is truly blind,” (from FT, Canada)

“In recent years the usage of condoms has greatly improved. In fact my country registered a reduction in the HIV infection rate, being one of the success stories in the world now. Through public advocacy campaigns and extensive use of the media, people have been educated about the pandemic. Condoms are widely available just about free of charge. Of course there have been some alarmists who once said that HIV was being spread through condoms but generally people have come to accept the necessity of using condoms outside marriage,” (from GM, Zimbabwe)

“Whether to use a condom or not depends on the urges and situation prevailing. If a young person has not fully told himself that he shall use a condom at any cost or if there is any compromise at all, then the risk is high,” (from AG, India)

REFERENCES

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