

Non-formal apprenticeships for rural youth – questions that need to be asked

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be gainfully employed and adequately equipped for the purpose. And to insist that this principle also applies, perhaps particularly so, to people at work at low levels of productivity and income, many unseen, ignored or inadequately aggregated in statistics as ‘others’, i.e. those who missed the boat to the formal, organised, structured or whatever-you-call-it economy.

By the same token, asking for evidence of skills development contributing to poverty reduction in informal sectors may imply that without legal proof thereof, one had better forget about investing in such skills. Who in their right mind, may I ask, would close down primary schools for disappointing rates of return, if in fact such rates are measured anywhere and taken seriously? Widespread poverty cannot ever be resolved without large-scale skills development. The question is therefore not whether or not, but how it should be done effectively. And the answer, as so often, depends on more things than most people care to imagine. Silver bullets do not apply!

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Non-Formal Apprenticeships for Rural Youth – Questions that Need to be

Asked, by Dorte Thorsen, University of Reading

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Keywords: West Africa; non-formal apprenticeships; decision-making; youth agency

Summary: This piece examines the decision-making surrounding rural youths’ entry into non-formal apprenticeships and draws attention to issues that may make youth less interested in completing an apprenticeship or decrease the benefits of technical training.

Across developing countries, skills development and technical training are identified as means to increase youth’s future employability in decent work and eliminate the worst forms of child labour amongst those below 18 years. In West Africa, the entry requirements and costs of attending technical college exclude children of poor families from pursuing formal training. This does not mean, however, that young people and their parents are oblivious to the potential of developing technical skills as a means to break the cycle of poverty; the desire to enter non-formal apprenticeships has risen dramatically in the past decade, as has the opportunity to join one of the numerous workshops in the cottage industries.

The dynamics of non-formal apprenticeships vary significantly. In the coastal countries of West Africa, for example, it is common for apprentices to pay fees ranging from US\$ 55-312, whereas in the Sahelian countries apprenticeships are mostly mediated through social networks. Payment or not, the apprenticeships are similar in their informal arrangement and resemblance of a socialisation process or an initiation rather than professional training. Policies addressing youth’s skills development and technical training seek to improve and standardise these non-formal apprenticeships to ensure that the transfer of skills is adequate and happens within an appropriate time frame. The focus is thus on the provision of technical training, but

very little is known about why and how youth enter certain trades or about differences in training opportunities that may exist between rural and urban youth. Based on multi-sited ethnography of young people's migration from rural Burkina Faso to the capital and neighbouring countries, this piece examines the decision-making surrounding rural youths' entry into non-formal apprenticeships. For them, relocation is a precondition for learning other skills than farming, trade or being a blacksmith, cobbler, etc.

Amongst policy-makers, it is believed that skills development and technical training for children of the rural poor should aim at increasing their employability in rural areas but does this idea correspond with the aspirations of the rural population? In rural Burkina Faso, both adults and young people consider non-formal apprenticeships as a path to social mobility and a remedy for broken dreams when children have to drop out of school against their will but, similar to school education, apprenticeships raise aspirations of off-farm work that offers better prospects for the future than straddling various livelihood activities in remote villages. Additionally, for parents, apprenticeships are a way to deter youth in their teens from becoming labour migrants and thus serve as a protective mechanism.

The father of an 18-year old tailoring apprentice explained how he had arranged an apprenticeship for his son in the capital, Ouagadougou, three years earlier when he saw that the boy would not accept to just farm and was likely to suddenly leave for Côte d'Ivoire like so many other boys. "He was too young to do hard physical work and would either suffer because of the work or because he didn't earn enough to eat well."

Not all youth appreciate this protection however. Becoming an apprentice implies working for three to four years without earning an income, after which a measly income can be reaped from work under the patron. As labour migrants, youth can earn an income - albeit small - from the day they find employment or engage in informal services such as shoe-shining, transporting goods, itinerant trade, etc. Moreover, an apprenticeship entails acquiescing to a subordinate position just at a time when many youths seek a degree of autonomy through migration. Hence, youth are not always interested in non-formal skills development and training

How youth become apprentices is another question about which little is known. It is assumed that young people convey to adults what they would like to do, whereupon they will start an apprenticeship in that trade but, in fact, this does not fit well with the way in which social relations and labour usually work in the informal economy of West Africa. Here people are put to work due to their position in the network of kin rather than to their skills and interests. It is thus important to raise questions about who has a say in choosing the trade and the degree to which young people can pursue their own interests. The story recounted by the tailoring apprentice is illustrative:

My grandfather decided I should learn mechanics and my father that I should learn tailoring. I liked my grandfather's idea but it is difficult to find an apprenticeship as a mechanic here in Ouagadougou. Some require fees to be paid making it more difficult. When I first came, I asked relatives to help me find a garage but when they didn't have the time to search on my behalf and I had no luck within the first month, I resigned myself to tailoring. I learned tailoring from a relative; so no fees were required.

Young people usually rely on relatives or friends to take them on as apprentices or to mediate an apprenticeship and guarantee their interest in learning the trade. Here rural youth are disadvantaged compared to urban youth because they rely on links between their relatives in the village and possible patrons or on the help of urban-based relatives who may be approached by youth from different branches of the family. Another issue is that within the extended family, several people may seek to assert their views on what is best for a child, and while this may create more opportunities and thus give a young person an individual choice, it may also create conflicts. As a result, relatives sometimes shy away from assisting a young person in order to avoid accusations of disrespecting a senior family member who had another vision for the youth. Finally, the number of small one-person workshops has mushroomed in urban areas, implying that it has become easier to find a relative or a patron willing to expand the business with apprentices. However, not all patrons have adequate technical skills to impart or an established circle of clients to provide work through which apprentices can learn.

Young people's access to non-formal apprenticeships thus depends on their family's economic and/or social endowment. Whether their future employability really is improved or their prospects for starting their own workshop successfully depends on the quality of their technical training and the interest they muster in learning the trade, especially if they would rather have done something different.

Follow-up resources

Hashim, I. M. & Thorsen, D. 2011. *Child migrants in Africa*, London, Zed Books.

Thorsen, D. 2009. Mobile youth with little formal education: Work opportunities and practices. Brighton: University of Sussex. (http://www.migrationdrc.org/news/reports/Child_and_Youth_Migration/papers/Thorsen%20Accra%20English.pdf)

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'Skilling' the Workforce in India – different models? by Jeemol Unni, Institute of Rural Management, Anand, Gujarat, India

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Keywords: India; youth; demand-supply; National Commission for Enterprises in the Unorganized Sector (NCEUS); National Skill Development Corporation (NSDC)

Summary: India's youth bulge will not yield a 'demographic dividend' for the country while so many of them lack skills. There are currently many skills development initiatives underway, but supporting on the job training in the massive unorganized sector should be a priority as this is where most jobs for the youth are created.
