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MINISTRY OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS OF DENMARK



The voice of youth in the Sahel

A dialogue between youth organisations and state institutions

What economic opportunities do youth have?

Rapid population growth in the Sahel region has created a gap between the number of young job seekers and the economic opportunities available to them. State-run public services, which are the traditional job providers in these countries, will soon be unable to accommodate the number of youth graduating from university each year. The structural problem of insecurity in the region has also impeded economic activity, restricting the free movement of goods and people reducing tourism and handicraft trade.

Entrepreneurial culture is still nascent in the Sahel region; the informal sector lacks structure; rural areas feel marginalised; vocational training is ill-adapted to existing economic opportunities and discrimination against women continues to limit their access to employment. Such constraints call for the need to identify alternative employment opportunities to support the job market in the region.

In 2017, meetings were organised following the establishment of 25 local and national dialogue frameworks across the G5 Sahel countries. These brought together 1,250 youth organisation delegates and representatives from their respective governments to discuss the challenges on increasing economic opportunities in the region, the third most keenly discussed issue after education and training. In 2018, the delegates decided on initiatives to be launched in each of the G5 Sahel countries in response to the most pressing and interdependent issues they identified.

Utilising, transforming and distributing natural resources

‘Let’s show our youth that they are not destined only for subsistence farming to feed their families, but that they can develop a commercial approach that promotes the produce from their fields.’

Few youth are interested in agriculture, fishing or traditional cattle-raising. For them, these activities are associated with another age and are dissociated from today’s new technologies. Modernising agriculture is thus a priority to restore the image of an economic sector with a great potential to generate jobs and enable self-sufficiency in the region.



During discussions with representatives from their respective governments, youth delegates have called for the creation of a sub-regional training centre that focuses on professions that utilise natural resources to promote excellence and innovation. They have also highlighted three main priorities: agrarian reform to improve land distribution to favour those who struggle most to gain access (women and youth), simplified access to financing for young farmers, fishers and cattle breeders to ease the purchase of equipment, and the development of local industries dedicated to processing, conserving and distributing agricultural products. Several youth organisations also called for the better regulation of the gold mining sector in relevant areas.

Opening up rural areas and promoting their economic potential

'Our Sahelian countries need to envision a type of rural development more adapted to their realities.'

'I am a young graduate from a rural background; I returned home after university. Unfortunately, I can't see any professional prospects for me here.'

Youth organisations claim that there is no shortage of economic opportunities, though they have not been clearly identified nor appropriately valued. This is most evident in rural areas, where there is insufficient road infrastructure to connect rural areas to urban areas or to one another. Youth delegates have selected two ways to help develop growth 'hubs' that promote local prospects: the construction of roads to ease the movement of goods and people and the creation of locally managed training centres that adapt their educational curricula to the economic needs of their each region. Delegates have stressed that achieving these entails reinforcing the efforts of international partners to support these development policies.

State authorities have also been encouraged to make more and better use of new technologies to aid the youth's access to job offers, public markets etc. Insufficient internet coverage in rural areas also calls for creating community centres that could promote exchanges between the youth and their elders. In all of the above-mentioned initiatives, special attention should be given to encouraging women's access to the job market and avoid their confinement to the informal sector due to prejudice and lack of education.

Making finance for entrepreneurship accessible

'In Niger, big companies that secure public market contracts should commit to working with at least one start-up as a subcontractor. This would encourage the creation of new companies.'

Although youth increasingly dream of becoming entrepreneurs, the fear of the associated risks prevent many from launching their own businesses. Youth delegates have emphasised the importance of the educational system has to play in fostering an entrepreneurial culture from an early age.

Business incubators could also contribute to the growth of new companies by providing work spaces for them, sharing financing information, and offering advice from more experienced peers. Delegates have underlined that these incubators should consider two key elements: they should value the expertise and desire to return of diaspora youth; and they should be accessible to those actors involved in the informal sector who often lack education but whose businesses would benefit from a little more structure.

Youth delegates also feel that simplifying access to financing would also increase entrepreneurship in the Sahel region. The delegates have proposed adapting loan eligibility criteria, interest rates, and reimbursement plans to the needs of youth, offering loan guarantee schemes to help youth in accessing bank loans and providing tax relief for new companies.

'Without a motorbike, land, or a house to serve as collateral, I was refused access to the financing needed to launch my project.' Youth delegates have highlighted the need to develop home-grown national financing mechanisms for new businesses through trusting potential regional investors within the region and not expecting too much from those outside.



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