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G rard Lassibille

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Book review : Youth unemployment and employment policy: a global perspective

Niall O'Higgins, Geneva: International Labour Office, 2001. pp. xii+212. Price: 27.50 Swiss Francs (paper).

Gérard LASSIBILLE

IREDU-CNRS

Université de Bourgogne

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This book considers the issue of youth unemployment in various countries (industrialized, in transition and developing) and provides concrete policy recommendations to promote employability of young people.

The first part of the book documents the “problem” of youth employment. After describing the incidence of youth unemployment among OECD countries in chapter one, the book analyzes in chapter two the characteristics of youth employment. Based on international data (gathered by OECD and ILO, as well as information extracted from specific country report studies) the chapter shows that unemployment is not evenly spread among young people. Indeed, the international comparisons indicate clearly that unemployment is significantly higher among young people with low levels of education as well as the disabled, ethnic minorities and, to some extent, among young women. The foregoing picture suggests that youth employment policies should not be aimed at young people as a whole, but rather should concentrate on those particular segments of the population. Chapter three sheds light on both the causes and consequences of youth unemployment. The available cross country experience shows that youth unemployment mainly reflects poor macroeconomic performance; as a consequence emphasis must be placed on creating sufficient growth and improving the employment content of growth. Other factors like the rise in the relative size of the youth labour force, are also important in explaining the incidence of unemployment among young people. However, in most countries, sustained economic growth can overcome many of the problems associated with the rapid growth of the youth labour market. In contrast, international data indicate that there is no strong evidence that youth unemployment is closely linked to youth/adult relative wage rates. Persistent and high unemployment among the youth are a major cause of concern. More attention should be paid to redressing the imbalance in job opportunities available to disadvantaged young people, due to the fact that both the incidence and the duration of unemployment are particularly important among certain groups of the population.

The second part of the book looks at the policy response to youth unemployment across different countries. Chapter four is a brief discussion on the usefulness of an overall youth policy. It describes different initiatives and recommendations adopted at international level for improving youth employment policy (such as the “World Programme of Action for Youth to the Year 2000 and Beyond” adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 1995, and the 1998 “Guideline for Employment Policy” adopted by the European Commission) arguing that national educational and employment policies have to be coordinated. Chapter five focuses on the role of monitoring and evaluation of the design and implementation of any new policy and programme, aimed at reducing youth unemployment. Improving labour market information and data collection, particularly in developing countries, and creating a system of continuous monitoring and evaluation, are essential elements for effective responses to the youth

employment problem. Chapter six analyzes the impact of a change in the minimum wage on youth employment. Based on a wide range of studies carried out in industrialized and developing countries on this topic, the author shows that increasing youth wages does not necessarily lead to lower youth unemployment. According to international experiences such policies have generally a small or zero effect on youth employment and there is little or no reason for adopting such a measure, although it may have other useful effects on income distribution. Chapter seven looks at the role of education and training systems in reducing youth unemployment. Indeed, the chapter examines the organization of education systems according to several aspects (role of certification, sources of finance, school vs work-based training, sequential vs dual systems); the chapter also analyzes the ability of the German dual system to facilitate the transition from school to work, and discusses the extent to which such a system could be adopted by other countries. Chapter eight examines the role of active labour market policies in reducing youth employment. The chapter focuses on three kinds of policies most commonly used across countries: a) policies designed to promote wage employment; b) policies encouraging self-employment among the young and c) policies aimed at disadvantaged young people. Indeed, experiences from several countries (The UK, Jamaica, The USA, Chile) are documented. Chapter nine discusses the role workers' and employers' organizations may play in the design and implementation of youth employment policies. For example, the involvement of social partners in determining the curricula of courses within the dual apprenticeship system, or in formulating and implementing active labour market policies, is likely to improve the relevance and effectiveness of programmes aimed at facilitating the transition of young people from school to work. Finally chapter ten summarizes the main policy recommendations discussed throughout the book.