

Regional Dialogue on Youth Employment in the Western Balkan

What works and why?

Summary of first regional meeting

A first regional meeting and exchange on the topic of youth employment was organized in Belgrade on 19 November. The goal of the regional meeting was to gather SDC and GIZ youth employment projects in Western Balkans together.

More than 30 participants from 7 projects¹ discussed lessons learnt, shared experiences and learned about different approaches. In addition, SDC and GIZ invited representative of the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) to moderate the exchange and colleagues from the European Training Foundation (ETF) to provide an assessment on the presented experiences and models. Experts from the International Labour Organization (ILO) and Regional Cooperation Council (RCC) also provided their feedback to the presented approaches. The event was back to back to a [National Dialogue for youth held in Belgrade](#) - another product of this SDC-GIZ cooperation in Serbia.



An expert's conclusion

Cristina Mereuta, a labour market specialist from the ETF, summarized the whole day of the peer-exchanges as follows:

- **Having an institutional champion is essential for outreach, scalability, sustainability goals.** Institutional leaders that are driving the policy discussion are important to raise awareness about the topic of youth employment.
- **Importance of affordability and feasibility of measures promoted.** Interventions must be affordable for the current institutional services (e.g. public employment services, schools) in terms of human resources and financial resources. Adoption of new standards might be necessary in order to ensure quality, but it is important to choose not necessarily the fanciest solution, but rather the most feasible one for the ground implementation.
- **More coordination and cooperation between donor interventions.** The need for improved coordination among the different interventions was repeatedly voiced, not only for complementing one another, but also for learning from each other. For example, to avoid duplication of efforts when introducing M&E in VET schools, it is important to coordinate with others to promote similar or joint approaches.
- **Aging of staff in public Employment Services and VET schools.** In probably all the countries of Western Balkans, the staff of the national employment services is aging. Therefore, continued investment in younger generation and transfer of knowledge between generations is a must (e.g. through train-the-trainers approaches).

¹ From Bosnia and Herzegovina: Youth Employment Project (SDC); from North Macedonia: Education for Employment (SDC); from Kosovo: Enhancing Youth Employment (SDC) and Youth, Employment and Skills (GIZ); from Serbia: From Education to Employment (SDC), Youth Employment Promotion (GIZ/FAKT), Reform of Vocational Education and Training (GIZ)

- **Involvement of local community.** Local level approach to addressing youth employment is extremely important and a bottom-up approach is pursued in many projects. Many initiatives include elements of tackling youth employment from the demand and the supply side. In future, it might be worthwhile to place these local efforts in an overall regional development framework as each locality for itself may not have a sufficient critical mass of entrepreneurs for sustainable job creation.
- **Available skills affect a lot what you can teach at secondary level.** The upcoming PISA results for the region will be important in this regard. A reform of the vocational education and training system is ongoing in many if not all Western Balkan countries and this an opportunity for the improvement of the position of youth in the labour market. Notably work-based learning gains good reputation and increased interests.
- **Vulnerability of youth.** Looking at the region, young people are particularly vulnerable as the often work in informal jobs and decent work is not guaranteed. Projects need to be sensitive to these issues and do no harm. Also, active labour market measures are not tailored to the needs of the disadvantaged youth. Data is not collected in full extent and there is a need for long-term labour market information system upgrade. This is an area where the different projects can feed in this process.

Test outside the system... then integrate

Looking at the situation in the region, one important question was raised: ***to what extent the projects should be investing in capacity replacement?*** Projects should avoid substituting for non-functioning government services and make sure that the demand for support is genuine and complemented with a vision of the country government on how to promote youth employment. The most crucial points of any intervention including the ones focusing on youth employment are therefore: ***what are sustainability prospects of the models and measures applied through the projects?*** Many countries in the region focus on the legal aspects and work on the framework redesign while these changes are not reflected in their budget allocations, and it is evident that funds for labour market measures decrease over time. This brings donors to a challenging position, and even calls for a revision of the approach. The participants concluded that the projects role is to test the measures and models, reach an improvement, make better situation for some youth and then integrate the successful interventions into the system.



What will happen next?

This first regional gathering showed a clear need to deepen the exchange. The present projects showed how their interventions managed to make a difference in lives of the young women and men in the region. However, in future it would be most beneficial to more focus similar exchanges on specific topics, for example on the role of the private sector in youth employment, especially the SMEs, role of the civil society as labour market intermediaries/brokers, social enterprises as an alternative for rural youth, etc.. This would enable projects to exchange more concretely on challenges faced in their every-day work.

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