



# Productive and Decent Work for Youth

A multi-stakeholder programme in the Mano River Union  
(Côte d'Ivoire, Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone)

In partnership with

International Labour Organization (ILO)  
Youth Employment Network (YEN)  
United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)

Governments of the Mano River Union

Funding: Japan, Austria, South-South Center India, World Bank, SIDA



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# Productive and Decent Work in the MRU: the motivation

Over the past decade and a half, the Mano River Union countries – Côte d'Ivoire, Guinea, Liberia and Sierra Leone – have been exposed to multifaceted challenges, including civil war, which have produced widespread economic and social disarray and insecurity. The common denominators of vulnerability in each country are a lack of infrastructure, a lack of diversification in the economy and a too pronounced dependency on raw materials and primary agricultural products.

The four countries have one of the world's youngest and poorest populations. Nearly three out of four people in the sub-region, or 71.3 per cent, are under the age of 30 and youth unemployment rates run around 70 per cent, and are as high as 88 per cent in Liberia. Female youth, often overlooked in youth employment programmes, deserve special attention as they account for half of the youth population. When young people do find a job, it is often in the informal economy, in low paid, low-skilled and unprotected jobs.

However, each of the four countries has exhibited extraordinary resilience—that is, the capacity of their societies to adapt to external shocks in a manner that allows them to continue to function. Once peace has been cultivated and the infrastructure improved, the Mano River subregion and its neighbouring countries offer massive opportunities for cross-border growth and trade. Youth job creation could also increase, benefiting from faster private sector development, more foreign direct investment and youth access to credit. In short, the MRU countries are looking towards a brighter future.

If nothing is done, the threat is that the residue of prolonged conditions of war and conflict, which engender political instability in the subregion, will continue to eat away at the already frayed social fabric. The “youth bulge” in demographics (i.e. high proportion of young people relative to the adult population)—which has been described as “a ticking time bomb” for the security of many developing countries due to youth's overall social marginalization and lack of education—will continue to burgeon. The dire warnings in Robert Kaplan's book, “The Coming Anarchy”, that describes young people in West African cities as “loose molecules in a very unstable social fluid that is clearly on the verge of igniting” will come true. We will see societies caught up in the throes of yet another scene of carnage.

*“If ever a joint, scaled-up effort were necessary to make a real difference, it would be here where conflict and the resulting weak social fabric are a daily threat to communities and to youth, who are the most precious asset for the future.”*

**Kandeh K. Yumkella**  
UNIDO Director-General  
(Accra, Ghana, February 2007)

# Productive and Decent Work in the MRU: a holistic approach



## The vision:

Ideally, using an integrated holistic approach, when the comprehensive long-term vision has been fulfilled by all partners, including national governments, the private sector, international organizations, NGOs, foundations and civil society itself, jobs will have been created for the young people in the Mano River Union countries.

**Beneficiaries** will range from one end of the demographic spectrum to the other: from illiterate youth to well-educated youth and from rural environments to urban areas. Young women will profit from these initiatives equally with young men. Pursuing a subregional approach, there will be profitable cross-border projects, which can be scaled up with resources leveraged to support them. The goal will be to scale up activities to an extent that catalyzes systemic change.

**The approach** consists of three complementary lines of action:

- Entrepreneurship development
- Micro-finance for start-ups and expansion
- Improved employment opportunities in formal enterprises

Through the comprehensive approach it is anticipated that not only a considerable number of youth will be able to become entrepreneurs or enter satisfying jobs, but the high visibility of the programme will contribute to a sense of progress and hope for a better future, convincing and motivating youth to stay and participate.

# Productive and Decent Work in the MRU: the response

## I. SELF-EMPLOYMENT AND ENTREPRENEURSHIP

### Youth-led business creation and support

Employment in the formal sector in the subregion grows extremely slowly. Therefore, the informal sector remains the major source of employment and income for young people, whether they start businesses as small producers or engage in small-scale trade. Providing capital and enhancing business skills are essential to upgrade the economic position of youth in organizing themselves for collective and productive activities.

Entrepreneurship and self-sustainable businesses and social projects can generate economic growth and jobs for both young men and women, acting as a driving force for the economies of the region and stimulating both the formal and informal sectors.

#### **Intervention area:**

- Cross-sectoral youth self-employment and entrepreneurship development in urban and rural areas for educated and marginalized youth

#### **Activities**

- Screening of local private sector/civil society actors in business support
- Develop eligibility criteria for the participation in the programme
- Create a network of private sector/civil society support structures promoting youth business start-ups and expansion of existing businesses (formal and informal sectors)
- Provide support to the network:
  - Training of trainers (technical and entrepreneurial skills including numeracy training)
  - Provision of technical training material and equipment
  - Link with existing vocational training institutions
  - Assisting in business plan development of the support structures to become self-sustainable
  - Link network with financial partner for initial funding of non-financial services provided by the network, where necessary
  - Provide assessment, monitoring and evaluation framework

#### **Deliverables**

- Capacity built of “home-grown” private sector/civil society support structures
- Bankable business plans developed
- Support and extension services for youth entrepreneurs
- User-friendly guidelines for assessment, monitoring and evaluation for youth-businesses

# Productive and Decent Work in the MRU: the response

## SELF-EMPLOYMENT AND ENTREPRENEURSHIP

### Microfinance for youth-led businesses

One of the major obstacles for successful entrepreneurship creation and expansion is that there is no link between financial and non-financial services. Experience has shown that entrepreneurial and technical training alone does not generate its full potential of results unless combined with adequate financial services.

The absence of financial services that are accessible for youth has proved a huge obstacle for youth in the Mano River Union, particularly for youth from socially disadvantaged areas. The financial sector mostly serves wealthier, higher margin enterprises and persons with guaranteed salaries. Business start-ups are rarely served. Young people are viewed as a high credit risk and many lack financial literacy. National and/or subregional funding mechanisms targeting youth business and youth social entrepreneurship are non-existent.

#### Intervention areas:

- Small loans accessible to youth traditionally excluded from formal financial services
  - Business start-ups
  - Expansion of existing businesses

#### Activities

- Financial sector study
- Develop partnerships with international and national players in microfinance
- Linking youth to financial institutions
- Development of support structures for youth embedded in youth civil society groups
- Training and technical assistance of youth including business plan development and extension services
- Networking of potential and existing youth entrepreneurs on the subregional level through ICT

#### Deliverables

- New individual and group youth business start-ups
- Increased production of supported enterprises
- Reduced risk through linkages between financial and non-financial services
- Strengthened micro-finance sector



# Productive and Decent Work in the MRU: the response

## II. EMPLOYABILITY

### Youth employability in partnership with private sector businesses

In the MRU subregion, the presence of multinational enterprises (MNEs) and investments in dynamic economic sectors (both foreign and domestic) are a promising yet untapped source of job creation for young people. Potential is high in industries such as mining, timber, and agriculture (cash crops), and their importance as engines for employment generation is increased further given the indirect employment created within their supply chains.

A number of dynamic medium and large-scale private sector companies are present in the region of the MRU in such sectors as mining, forestry, agro-industry, services and construction. While they create considerable employment opportunities for local youth, the jobs are often given to expatriate workers due to the inadequacy of required skills in the local labour force.

#### **Intervention areas:**

- Youth employability in large-scale enterprises
- Technical and vocational training (TVET)

#### **Activities**

- Study labour demand and skill requirements in the private sector and its employment impact
- Upgrade technical skills programmes matching private sector skills requirements
- Review and improve the capacity of TVET in accordance with labour market demand
- Develop common certification system for specific courses

#### **Deliverables**

- Increased employment opportunities in private sector enterprises
- Vocational training system upgraded
- A common certification system for the subregion

# Productive and Decent Work in the MRU: the response

## EMPLOYABILITY

### Employment intermediation and information

There is limited availability of information on employment opportunities in the subregion. A labour information system is needed to link job seekers and employment providers in the formal and informal sectors and to identify employment opportunities.

#### Intervention areas:

- Labour market and intermediary information system (LMIS)

#### Activities

- Review of existing employment services and methods for data collection
- Develop action plans for the establishment of labour intermediation institutions
- Establish job centers

#### Deliverables

- Subregional LMIS
- Employment Services at the subregional level
- Increased number of employers and employees linked



# Productive and Decent Work in the MRU: the response

## III. YOUTH-LED DEVELOPMENT

### MRU grant scheme for employment generating activities

Youth-led development can serve as a catalyst for a new type of development, and transform the future generations by giving them the keys to their own destiny and the means to decide their own futures.

The grant scheme is to actively engage youth organizations in youth employment emphasizing and demonstrating the importance and potential of youth as active participants in development. The scheme serves to identify and support small scale, innovative ideas for achieving better employment opportunities for the young people (ages 15 to 30).

Eligible applicants are officially registered, non-governmental, non-profit youth organizations in the MRU region.

#### **Intervention area:**

- Grants for youth-led projects ranging from \$7,000 to 50,000 through competition covering:
  - Promotion of youth entrepreneurship
  - Community projects and services
  - Vocational training for young people
  - Transition from school to work
  - Economic empowerment of young women

Project activities cover reconstruction, purchase of material, training, providing work experience and job placement.

#### **Activities**

- Organize call for proposals (media campaign, youth network info sessions)
- Screening and short-listing of projects
- Establish support structures embedded in youth civil society groups for:
  - Project document finalization
  - Site visits and monitoring

#### **Deliverables**

- Engaging youth as partners in development
- Promoting and testing innovative solutions
- Creating jobs
- Creating social capital through “ home-grown” institutions
- Supporting local and national government priorities
- Open and transparent selection procedure
- Monitoring and evaluation framewor

# Productive and Decent Work in the MRU: the response

## YOUTH-LED DEVELOPMENT

### MRU communication and information system

Direct engagement of youth in programme development and evaluation requires the creation of viable outlets for youth to participate at community, regional and national level, offering platforms for the voices of youth to be heard and including them in significant decision-making processes on issues that affect them.

#### Intervention areas:

- Subregional networking and communication

#### Activities

- Creation of self-sustaining communication hubs
- Development of the MRU web-based, youth-friendly communication platform
- Organization of the MRU Youth Forum

#### Deliverables

- Youth as active partners in development
- A web of youth organizations as potential services providers for youth-led businesses
- Subregional networking and business promotion



# Productive and Decent Work in the MRU: initial partners

## Governance:

- **Host of the programme: Mano River Union Secretariat, Freetown, Sierra Leone**

The MRU Secretariat coordinates programme implementation, advocates for ongoing political support and mobilises the donor community.

- **Steering Committee**

The Steering Committee serves as final decision-making body and is responsible for programme policy. It oversees the implementation of activities carried out under the auspices of the programme. Its membership includes representatives from Ministries of Youth and Sport, UN agencies, Youth Groups and donor representatives. It is chaired by the Secretary-General of the Mano River Union.

## Funding partners:

- Government of Japan
- Multilateral Development Cooperation of Austria
- Government of India, UNIDO South-South Centre
- Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency
- World Bank



# Productive and Decent Work in the MRU:

## Future directions

In the wake of political stabilization and economic recovery of the Mano River Union region, measures are needed to strengthen its economic, environmental and social resilience. Productive and decent work for youth is at the crux of the problem and also of the solution.

The Multi-stakeholder Programme for Productive and Decent Work for Youth has started to make a difference in the lives of young people in the Mano River Union region.

### Initial phase – grounds prepared

- Engagement of national and local governments
- Project support structure established
- Comprehensive analysis and baseline data
- Create a network of private sector/civil society business support structures
- Establishment of local youth civil society network for innovative youth employment projects (“youth civil society window”)
- Sensibilization of financial institutions (international and local levels)
- Communication platform and hubs established
- National, subregional and global awareness raising and media campaigns

### Main phase – consolidation and scaling up

- Diversify portfolio of interventions to achieve self-sustainability
- Build capacity of network of private sector/civil society business support structures
- Establish partnerships with financial institutions for the development of micro-finance for youth-led businesses
- Coordinate non-financial and with financial services for youth entrepreneurs in both formal and informal sectors
- Link all actors through the MRU communication platform
- Continue to support innovative youth employment projects through the “youth-civil society window”

### Exit scenario

- Home-grown institutions provide services to youth entrepreneurs
- MFIs provide micro-finance to youth entrepreneurs
- Youth-led businesses are registered as formal-sector enterprises
- Private sector enterprises provide employment opportunities for youth
- Technical and vocational training institutions provide standardized training
- Labour market information systems are functional



For more information, please refer to:

**<http://my.mryouthplatform.org>**

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For more information, please refer to:

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