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Misconceptions about inclusiveness: not 'why' but 'how'

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All blogs

Zenebe Uraguchi looks at how a youth employment programme aims to boost social inclusion in Albania.

Before showing how inclusiveness in development projects can be addressed, I will highlight some common misconceptions about inclusiveness.

Inclusiveness isn't just about achieving economic growth or addressing economic inequality (in absolute or relative terms). It's also about agency: the capacity to participate meaningfully in development initiatives and achieve social and political inclusion.

It's often thought that inclusiveness and growth can't go hand in hand. Many development projects choose or prioritise one over the other as their goal. However, the inclusiveness goal of any development project is fundamental and a given. If a project fails to be inclusive, then it has a problem.

Inclusiveness is not primarily about poor and disadvantaged women and men. Sustainable and scalable impacts require inclusive participation of those who have the power and leverage to work with poor and disadvantaged women and men. This can include the public and private sector as well as civil society.

Now to the big question: how can inclusiveness be achieved?

First, inclusiveness is achievable when the objective of the development project goes beyond the moral imperative of 'doing good'. This requires understanding what the key barriers to inclusion are. Second, the objective of ensuring inclusiveness needs to be matched with good frameworks or strategies – ensuring inclusion by design.

Understanding inclusiveness: more than a moral imperative

Inclusive development is both an end and a means. As an end – by working with different stakeholders or actors – inclusiveness benefits poor and disadvantaged women and men by enabling them to get a better income, job or well being. As a process, it connotes participation and empowerment.

In projects that adopt a systemic approach, inclusiveness is part of the strategic vision. The vision defines the goal of the project's interventions, it identifies the opportunities and assesses the feasibility of contributing to impacts by changing or improving systems around poor and disadvantaged women and men. The labour market is a good example, and youth unemployment or underemployment is a major economic and social issue.

Let's look at an example from Albania, a country where a quarter of the population are between the ages of 15-29. This group has the highest level of unemployment in Albania. The official youth unemployment rate is around 21%, which is double that of the rest of the working age population. Furthermore, most of the employed youth work in unpaid family jobs (46% mainly in agriculture) and in informal jobs (93% do not have a contract), which could suggest severe underemployment and poor employment conditions. If we add 'unpaid employed' to the number of unemployed, the youth unemployment rate would be 58%!

Therefore, sustainable and scalable solutions to the labour market problem that target poor and disadvantaged young women and men requires us to understand why they don't have access to employment opportunities. In the case of Albania, the existing opportunities to create employment aren't benefiting young people because business and financial services, as well as the business environment, don't support the growth of potential subsectors such as agro-processing, ICT and tourism. In addition, matching services, especially related to guidance and placement, do not effectively link supply (jobseekers) and demand (employers).

A feasible strategy

Development projects need strategies that will enable them to deliver results that are long-lasting and large-scale. Let me elaborate with examples from Risi, a youth employment project in Albania, implemented by HELVETAS Swiss Intercooperation and its local partner.

First, effective targeting of poor and disadvantaged women and men is possible when strategies are based on local poverty dynamics and address real needs and potential. Risi identified agro-processing, tourism and ICT as sectors that employ young people and have the potential to grow fast in the next few years. So as part of the project's strategy, Risi shifted resources, especially workers, out of low productivity areas into more productive sectors.

Second, better results can be achieved when strategies take into account the ability of poor and disadvantaged women and men to make their own effective choices and to transform these into desired outcomes. For example, young women and men in Albania receive inadequate guidance at the early stages of their professional lives – that is, when they are making choices as to what field of studies and profession would suit them. The result is an oversupply of certain skill profiles (e.g. law or management) while often skills that are demanded by the private sector remain undersupplied (e.g. engineering).

To address this constraint, Risi works with public and private sector players. It has reached out to the media to strengthen their capacities to report on relevant and adequate labour market information. The project has supported innovative recruitment services to close the gap between existing high-end headhunting companies and the public employment services. For example, supporting the creation of mobile apps for employment application processes and for job postings.

To conclude, economic, political and social inclusiveness is fundamental in development projects. Inclusiveness is primarily about poor and disadvantaged women and men but we must work with the private and public sector as well as civil society. Therefore, it is critical for development projects to go beyond the moral imperative of 'doing good' and understand what the key barriers to inclusion are. This, in turn, requires good strategies for ensuring sustainable and scalable impacts.

This blog was originally posted on the Helvetas website *and is republished here with kind permission.*

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