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A review of 'A rough guide to the MSD approach for youth employment in sub-Saharan Africa'



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All blogs

A useful guide - especially in relation to my recent work with SDC's Enhancing Youth Employment (EYE) in Kosovë

Justin van Rhyn, assisted by a host of bright minds, has written [this guide](#) to help those working on youth employment to do a good job. It is a welcome addition to the BEAM Exchange knowledge base and I encourage you to read it, think about it, discuss with colleagues and be inspired to do better.

I particularly like the continuing emphasis on checking our assumptions, especially about what young people want. Justin asks, "How close is your own background to that of your programme's beneficiaries?" It is to Robert Chambers and participatory learning and action who most surely inspired that question.

The guide is made even more useful by the reference in footnotes to other guides and documents. Most notable amongst these is Springfield's [Operational guide for the M4P approach](#).

A foundational behaviour for all people working in market systems is to be critical and curious, always seeking the truth in any argument and wary of assertions founded on rhetoric. The guide calls us to be careful, to check and measure, to support one another through disagreement to success.

A particular feature of labour in market systems is that it is about people not machines, and that makes the market system distinctly personal, social, cultural

and political. So, we need to understand the link to politics since jobs are often a hot topic with significant and unpredictable interventions by political parties, elected representatives, government agencies and ministries. Workers are voters: jobs mean votes. So, no surprise that public subsidies and free services are prominent. It is not just a matter of economic rationality and good business. The social and cultural aspects need to be understood too. A job is a significant part of a person's existence.

The guide touches on skills needed by project teams referring to youth specialists and those with labour market expertise. As in all areas where we are forming partnerships to facilitate change, a team is stronger if it knows the jargon, acronyms, buzzwords, and key concepts of the market - and this comes from experience as much as study. It also helps to have access to key influencers and informants.

A particular feature of labour in market systems is that it can organise and form representative and advocacy organisations that interact with employers and government. MSD projects need to understand this too, as part of the institutional analysis that is done. Youth organisations can also be a relevant feature of the market system, whereby projects can engage and potentially partner with them.

Although it is convenient, the risk of founding a discussion of a market around only two parts (demand and supply) is that we forget the interplay between the parts - the exchange, the market. So, when you read the sections of the guide that refer to supply or demand-side factors, remember it is more like yin and yang, with one part inevitably forming and being influenced by the other.

It is this duality and interplay that we most need to understand, leverage and influence. Try not to think of an intervention as demand or supply-side, even if there is that emphasis. Remember the duality is what makes the market hum and vibrate with energy.

My final observation on the guide is a minor disagreement with a recommendation in the diagnosis section: "... the recommended approach in MSD for youth employment is to position the labour market as the primary system and to consider the priority economic sectors as demand-side drivers." Labour cannot be the primary system (core market) because it is a factor of production. In the same way other factors of production (land and capital) cannot be the core market. Always remember to consider what the labour is doing - and there you will find the core market. The concept of a labour market system is too general and superficial because there is so much variation between economic sectors.

I also disagree because the nature of the economic sector in which people are working, or self-employed, shapes far more than just the demand-side drivers. It also shapes opportunities for change (entry points) and the feasibility of facilitating

change. For example, compare heavy industry, livestock farming, tourism and IT sectors - there is a lot of variation in how each is perceived by youths, the formality of the sector's use of labour, its political prominence, and the scope for indirect influence from a project.

- > Read the guide: [A rough guide to the MSD approach for youth employment in sub-Saharan Africa](#)
- > Watch the BEAM Exchange webinar exploring the findings of the guide: [Designing & delivering MSD youth employment programming in sub-Saharan Africa](#) - that took place on 24th November 2022