Independent National Commission on Human Rights of Liberia

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Report: The Right to Work and the Enjoyment of all Human Rights by Young People

1. **Introduction**

Realizing the importance of young people and the significant role they play in the overall socio-economic development of the continent, the African Union Constitutive Act and the African Union Commission strategic plan 2004-2007 give due priority to youth development and empowerment. They underscore the importance of youth participation and involvement in the development of the continent. Indeed, Africa’s renaissance cannot be realized if adequate investment is not made in the youth who constitute about 40 percent of the African population. To give substance to this commitment to the development of African youth, the AU has since developed a policy framework in the form of the African Youth Charter, which prescribes responsibilities to the Member States for the development of youth. The Summit of Heads of State and Government adopted this Charter at their Summit in Banjul in July 2006. Liberia has made strenuous efforts over the years to remedy the ever-growing problem of young people and unemployment. To this end, the government has initiated several efforts to improve the situation. Among the numerous policies adopted include: the employment policy of 2009; policy formulation and planning for youth participation in national development – a study conducted in 1984 by Mr. Asghar Hussain, a consultant invited from UNESCO; youth and the Labor Market – on history, state structures, and spheres of informalities by Emy Lindberg, 2004; amongst others.

Notwithstanding all of these efforts, unemployment, especially among young people, continues to be a phenomenal task. This paper seeks to examine unemployment as it relates to young people in the Liberian context and the exercise of all of their human rights. It will closely look at the definition and structure of unemployment and the significance of young people in Liberia.

According to the International Labor Organization (ILO), the world is currently facing an “unprecedented youth employment crisis”. It has been estimated that about a third of the young people in the Liberian labor force is currently unemployed, and that two-thirds of all Liberians live in abject poverty[[1]](#footnote-1). This is a further indication of enormous and severe productive unemployment. It is also assumed that over fifty percent (50%) of the total population of Liberia is said to be comprised of young people below the age of twenty (20) years of age[[2]](#footnote-2), which is a further confirmation that bulk of the young people in Liberia is unemployed. Furthermore, one-third of Liberia’s total population is between the ages of 15 and 35 years[[3]](#footnote-3) majority of who are either unemployed or underemployed. 68 percent of the Liberian labor force is employed on the informal labor market, about seventy-five percent of whom are mostly adults[[4]](#footnote-4). Open unemployment is said to be widespread especially among the young people and it is estimated that half this number is found in Monrovia due to rapid rural-urban migration.

Empowering young people in productive employment is also a key factor for peace and stability. Additionally, the guarantee for young people to enjoy all of their human rights including: the right to education; the right to health; the right to freedom of expression; the right to freedom of worship; the right to freedom of association and participation; the right to decent livelihood and appreciable standard of living amongst others is fundamental to the attainment of the participation of young people in development activities. Without jobs, poverty reduction will remain unattainable. Jobs creation, therefore, remains a top priority for the stimulation of productive employment.

Article 23 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) states: “Everyone has the right to work, to free choice of employment, to just and favorable conditions of work and to protection against unemployment. It further declares: “Everyone, without any discrimination, has the right to equal pay for equal work”. It further maintains that “Everyone who works has the right to just and favorable remuneration ensuring for himself and his family an existence worthy of human dignity, and supplemented, if necessary, by other means of social protection”. It closes by stating: “Everyone has the right to form and to join trade unions for the protection of his interests[[5]](#footnote-5)”.

1. **Who is a young person in the Liberian context?**

While the maturity age in Liberia is officially set at 18 years, the minimum age for the recruitment of young people for employment opportunity is 15 and the cut-off age is unofficially set at 35[[6]](#footnote-6). Sometimes the cutoff age runs up to 40 years. It is also assumed that over fifty percent (50%) of the total population of Liberia is said to be comprised of young people below the age of twenty (20) years of age[[7]](#footnote-7) it has been estimated that about one-third of the young people in Liberia are currently unemployed.

1. **Young people and their right to work**

Over the years, the Ministry of Labor has adopted several policies to ensure that much greater economic and political opportunities are created for all Liberians especially young people. Some of these interventions include the policies on “Youth and Labor Market in Liberia 2014” and the “National Employment Policy of 2009” among other policy instruments. All of these efforts are intended to empower young people to contribute productively to national economic development. Albeit these copious efforts, the exigency for employment especially for young people remains an enormous challenge for government. Unemployment and underemployment among young people are extremely high. The right to employment leads to the attainment of other rights. to augment efforts by the government to ensure the availability of jobs for young people, the President over the years has vacation jobs for student. Remunerations from the vacation jobs have helped students prepare for their return to school.

1. **Young people and their enjoyment of other rights**

The right to employment obviously leads to the enjoyment of other rights. The right to employment economically and financially empowers an individual to contribute positively to his/her own development and the development of the state.

The right of young people to employment and the enjoyment of other rights come with responsibilities to their own development and to development of their countries and continent. In other words, the rights embodied in national laws and policies and also in international treaties are accompanied by responsibilities as well. The Youth cannot expect governments to empower them while they do the opposite by abusing themselves in various ways such as substance abuse and etc. To be able to get maximum benefits from the implementation of the International and national laws, policies and treaties, it is expected that young people will also develop and promote the required self-discipline. Young people are expected to prepare themselves so that they will contribute positively to the socio-economic development of their country.

1. **Summary of Public Policy Programs on the Right of Young People to Productive Employment**

Due to the importance government attached to the participation of young people in national development, the Government of Liberia formulated a request to United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) in 1984 for a consultant to assist in studying the possibility of setting up a National Youth Service Corps. In commemoration of the International Youth Year in 1984, the Government of Liberia convened a National Youth Assembly to deliberate on strategies for the participation of young people in national development. Mr. Asghar Hussain, the Consultant from UNESCO, produced a policy paper entitled: “Policy Formulation and Planning for Youth Participation in National Development”. These and many efforts by the government to productively empower young people were overtaken by events of the fourteen (14) years of civil crisis which engulfed the nation.

In 2009, during the first administration of the first-elected post-war government, a National Employment Policy was developed. This policy has a two-pronged approach to employment including (a) Emergency Employment – Direct emergency job creation, initially through large-scale labor-intensive programs to build essential infrastructure (viz. rural roads and primary school classrooms), and a focus on food security (through increasing rice and cassava yields in particular) are examples of core priorities which can yield large-scale employment opportunities; and (b) Sustainable productive employment - promote productive employment that will reduce poverty, ensure peace and stability, and enhance the overall well-being of the Liberian population.

In this 2009 Employment Policy, which was produced by the Ministry of Labor, it was recognized that productive work opportunities are important to all of the population, yet there are specifically vulnerable groups which need to be supported in order to have equal access and opportunities. These include the young people, women, and people with disabilities. The Employment Policy, while recognizing all peoples’ rights to work, duly recognizes the need for special efforts for these particular groups.[[8]](#footnote-8)

It was recognized in this document that the majority of Liberia’s young people have spent more time engaged in war than in school. Spending the formative years in an environment marked by violent conflict has to a large extent deprived them of their right to education and opportunities to build the nation’s human resource base. Their preparation for working life has been severely impaired. Facilitating labor market entry of young people and creating conditions that allow them to access productive employment and decent work should be a matter of top priority for the government.

Given that youth employment is highly dependent on overall employment, the strategy to improve employment prospects for youth is embedded in the overall Employment Policy. This, however, will be combined with interventions addressing the specific disadvantages faced by young people entering and remaining in the labor market. This will include an integrated and holistic approach which combines overall policies with targeted measures, focused on *both* labor demand and supply, and quantitative as well as qualitative dimensions of employment.

Youth and the Labor Market in Liberia – on history, state structures and spheres of informalities by Emy Lindberg in 2014

According to this research document, most statistical figures produced by the government on youth employment could be misleading. It outlined several instances where there are conflicting figures on the rate of unemployment, the age definition of a youth and so on. It is important to note that developing countries, like Liberia, tend to lack accurate and updated data on their labor markets. “Measuring unemployment and formal labor markets in a low-income country with no welfare system” – where “very few people can afford to be unemployed (Cramer 2010:17) – is often unhelpful”.

1. **Challenges**

Lack of essential resources (including funds and relevant strategies) for effectively creating youth employment opportunities is a major challenge. In addition, there has been clarion call by youth and civil society for the Government to enact a national youth act that would compel the government to respond to the enormous youth crisis that engulfed post-war Liberia.

1. **Recommendations**
2. The Government should consider youth employment a priority agenda for its ‘pro-poor policy.’
3. The government should consider right to education as a key entry point to addressing unemployment, poverty, and eradication of harmful cultural practices that inhibit the realization of other rights, especially barriers faced by girls,
1. Core Welfare Indicators Questionnaire 2007 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. de Mel, Elder et al. 2013:1 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. LISGIS, 2008 National Census [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Ibd [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Article 23 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. de Mel, Elder et al. 2013:1 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. LISGIS 2008 National Census [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Ministry of Labor, R.L. *Employment policy 2009* P*.* 16 [↑](#footnote-ref-8)