

Preparing Youth for the Cameroonian Job Market

Abstract

Youth employment in Cameroon faces systemic challenges rooted in a dual labor market, where a restricted formal sector coexists with a dominant informal sector that accounts for approximately 90% of youth employment. This policy brief addresses the urgency of preparing Cameroon's young population (aged 16 to 35, representing 57% of the labor force) for stable, decent work to mitigate poverty, inequality, and the strain of rapid urbanization. The primary obstacles include a significant mismatch between educational curricula and market needs, a lack of professional experience, and limited access to critical job and financing information, particularly in rural areas. Regional and gender inequalities further worsen these difficulties. While the National Employment Fund (FNE) and targeted programs offer short-term resilience, their large-scale impact is limited by inadequate coordination and resource constraints. This brief advocates for a comprehensive, multi-stakeholder strategy focusing on four key areas: 1) Strengthening vocational training to better align skills with industry demands, emphasizing digital competencies; 2) Facilitating youth entrepreneurship through simplified procedures and dedicated micro-financing mechanisms; 3) Improving digital access in disadvantaged areas for enhanced connectivity; and 4) Enhancing coordinated governance among all stakeholders. Implementing these structural reforms is essential for Cameroon to unlock the potential of its youth and ensure a transition toward inclusive and sustainable economic growth.

Keywords: Sustainable economic growth; National employment fund; Cameroonian job market, Labor market

Introduction

Youth employment in Cameroon is a complex issue with very complicated challenges. Young people aged

Research Article

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Received: 25 November, 2025; **Accepted:** 11 December, 2025; **Published:** 18 December, 2025

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16 to 35 represent 57% of the labor force but many struggle to find work particularly in the formal sector which is now limited [1]. The United Nation forecasts that by 2050, 70% of Cameroonian's population will live in urban areas. Nevertheless, it has been noted that nearly 70% of young people who enter the labor market have no qualifications in terms of profession. The job market in Cameroon is characterized by a large informal sector, with estimates suggesting that 90% of youth employment in the country is in the informal sector. It is very important to revisit the case of the labor market in Cameroon by guiding and preparing the youths for future opportunities.

This policy brief aims to contribute to reducing poverty and inequality resulting from non-inclusive growth, rapid demographic change, and conflict. It first provides an overview of the labor market, then analyses the main challenges faced by young people, reviews existing initiatives, and finally proposes ways to better prepare youth for employment, before concluding with policy recommendations.

Section 1. Overview of the Labor Market in

Cameroon

The Cameroonian labor market is characterized by a strong duality: a dominant informal sector and a restricted formal sector. Nearly 90% of the workforce is in the informal sector: 45% in informal agriculture and 39% outside agriculture [2]. The formal sector employs about 16% (6% public, 10% private). This imbalance reveals the weakness of the structured private sector and its limited capacity to generate decent jobs. The sectoral structure shows that agriculture employs 43.4% of the active population for only 17.3% of GDP, industry 14.9% for 25.5% of GDP, and services 41.7% for 50% of GDP. The share of agricultural employment has decreased from 70% in 2000 to less than 43% in 2023, while services have increased from 20% to over 40% [3]. This reflects a structural transition, but the manufacturing sector remains marginal, accounting for barely 15% of jobs.

Youth unemployment (ages 15-34) is particularly concerning: 39% are employed, but many are underemployed or in the informal sector. In cities, unemployment reaches 17.9% in Yaoundé and 16% in Douala, highlighting urban pressure. Working conditions vary greatly: formal employment offers social benefits (insurance, retirement), but remains a minority. The informal sector is characterized by precarious conditions, long hours, and lack of social protection. Among the structural factors are a young population, secondary and tertiary education that is misaligned with market needs, and access barriers (gender, skills, financing, etc.).

Section 2. Challenges Faced by Youth in the Job Market in Cameroon

The Cameroonian youths, just like their peers in the countries, face challenges as they journey in to the maturity. The Cameroonian government is however not indifferent to these challenges as there are several mechanisms put in place to guarantee a bright future for youths. Cameroonian youths are facing many difficulties in the labor market in which we are going to elaborate in the following paragraphs;

Inadequate training and employment: the issue of professional integration for young graduates remains a significant challenge in Cameroon, particularly given the numerous diplomas awarded by various professional and university institutions. The principal

reason of unemployment is an educational curriculum that does not match the needs of the labor market, lack of professional training, and high taxes that discourage businesses [4].

Lack of professional experience: Many Cameroonian youths are still facing problems as far as professional sphere is concern, they are limited in access to quality of education and skills training, especially in the digital economy. This trend is not due to population changes or the raising of the educational participation age but rather reflects a growing separation between work and learning among young people. However, higher education levels are common among youth, they don't always translate to better opportunities, and many ends up in low-skill, informal sector jobs [5].

Limited access to information on opportunities: the issue of access to information on job opportunities in Cameroon are hindered by challenging political environment which restricts internet usage. In recent years, there has been positive progress with exchanges and dialogues from some think tank such as the Cameroon Economic Policy Institute (CEPI) via activities that have been able to engage with parliamentarians and government to discuss issues such as access to information and pathways to regulating hate speech.

Regional inequality and gender: the rural-urban relationship in Cameroon is still a very difficult situation to come across. A large proportion of the population lives below the poverty line, with women disproportionately affected, about 39% of the national population that lives below poverty line, this rate rises to 51.5% for women according to UN Cameroon [6]. More to that, youth especially those in rural areas, face challenges like limited access to quality education and employment opportunities, higher rate of unpaid labor. Lack of labor in the rural areas due to insufficient enterprises, fear of elephant's attacks in agricultural activities in certain zones, and school quality still encourage rural exodus of youths in the country.

Lack of funding for self-employment and entrepreneurship: the African Development Bank Group has approved a €63.09 million loan to Cameroon to promote entrepreneurship and improve skills to match industry needs. According to a study by the African Development Bank, only about 20% of young

entrepreneurs in Cameroon have received formal training in entrepreneurship. This lack of education and skill is a major concern, as it can limit the potential of young entrepreneurs and hinder the growth of businesses. Furthermore, many Cameroonian youths lack money to start-up businesses for simple reason that the money given by some organizations to help youths never reach them due to high level of corruption.

Section 3. Existing Initiatives and their Impact

Cameroon has a public framework and pilot projects aimed at the integration of youth. The baseline diagnosis is clear: those aged 18–35 represent a major part of the workforce and a large portion of youth employment remains informal, which reduces the impact of traditional employment policies [3]. Among public instruments, the National Employment Fund (FNE) plays a central role in financing training, company apprenticeships, and support for self-employment. It has existed since 1990 and remains the main tool for matching job offers and demand. However, its capacities are limited by budgetary constraints, governance that varies with cycles, and weak coordination with the formal private sector.

Targeted programs such as the Integrated Support Program for Actors in the Informal Sector (PIAASI/PIAASI) and the Program for Supporting Rural and Urban Youth (PAJER-U / PAJER-U) show encouraging local results: job creation, micro-credits, and technical training, particularly for rural and craft youth. These initiatives strengthen short-term economic resilience but struggle to generate decent and sustainable jobs on a larger scale without structured value chains and outlets. International partners (World Bank, ILO, AfDB, IDRC) support projects for inclusion and social adaptation that are beginning to integrate a dual approach (social protection + economic inclusion) and digital; these supports enhance the intervention capacity but do not replace a coherent national strategy for transforming the productive fabric [3].

Section 4. How Can Young People Be Prepared?

To prepare the Cameroonian youth for the job market, a comprehensive approach must be adopted that combines appropriate training, support for entrepreneurship, and capacity building of institutions. Firstly, it is essential that educational and vocational

training systems better meet market expectations. Too often, the skills taught do not match those sought by employers, which complicates the integration of young people. Therefore, it is necessary to strengthen technical and digital training, as well as to develop transferable skills-such as communication, problem-solving, and project management-which are increasingly in demand. Furthermore, promoting internships, on-the-job training, and apprenticeships would be a real lever to bridge theory and practice.

Next, youth entrepreneurship must be encouraged, as many face the weakness of the formal sector and have no other choice but to venture out alone, often in the informal sector. Public authorities must facilitate access to financing through dedicated funds or microcredits, and provide ongoing technical support so that these young entrepreneurs can sustain their activities. Simplifying administrative procedures and ensuring a minimum level of social protection are also necessary conditions for their success. Moreover, digital tools today offer a tremendous opportunity to improve access to information, training, and professional networking. It is therefore necessary to develop access to digital technology, particularly in rural or disadvantaged areas, so that all young people can benefit.

Finally, it is important that all stakeholders - State, private sector, local authorities, and civil society - work together. Coordinated governance, with strong partnerships and regular monitoring based on reliable data, will allow for the adjustment of policies according to the realities on the ground and maximize their impact.

Political Recommendations

- Strengthen skills and training: Integrate entrepreneurship education at all school levels and offer practical training in management, marketing, and finance, accompanied by mentoring from experienced professionals [7].
- Improve access to markets: Establish platforms and infrastructures that allow young entrepreneurs to reach markets and investors, while facilitating logistics and the movement of products, particularly for agriculture and SMEs.
- Make digital platforms more accessible to entrepreneurs in rural and informal areas: establish digital assistance centers in municipalities and

train entrepreneurs in the use of digital tools for business registration and formalization.

- Facilitate financing: Create a mechanism dedicated to young entrepreneurs to provide them with access to start-up funds and financial support tailored to their innovative projects.

Conclusion

The employment of young people in Cameroon is a major issue for the country's future. More than half of the active population is between 16 and 35 years old. This is a huge force that can contribute to development if well utilized. However, many young people work in

the informal sector and face difficulties finding stable employment, or lack the skills sought by employers. The government and several organizations have established programs to improve the situation, but the results remain limited due to a lack of coordination, resources, and participation from local businesses. To achieve this, training must be better adapted to market needs, entrepreneurship should be encouraged, especially in rural areas, and access to financing and employment information should be facilitated.

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Citation: Henri Kouam, Guy M W, Djamo H. "Preparing Youth for the Cameroonian Job Market." J Glob Entrep Manage (2025): 131 . DOI: [10.59462/3068-174X.3.3.131](https://doi.org/10.59462/3068-174X.3.3.131)