

Skills development - a shared responsibility of government and companies

The Hague, Stockholm, Paris – July 2022. Quality education, and in particular vocational education and training (VET), is an important precondition for economic growth. This certainly applies to developing countries, where good education and access to it cannot be taken for granted. Employers are often hindered by a 'skills gap'; employees are not or are insufficiently equipped for the work that they will do. One of DECP's areas of expertise is skills development. An exploration of its (22) partner countries shows that private companies themselves can do a lot to close the skills gap – a lot, but not everything.

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Real changes take a long time

A recent survey by Randy Mpongo, partly based on UNESCO data from September 2021, shows that in most African countries less than 10%* of young people are in higher education. Curricula are set by the government. Developing a curriculum is a lengthy process. Therefore, once it is applied by schools, it often lags behind developments in the business world. The competency needs of employers, regarding knowledge, skills and attitude, change faster than curricula can keep up. This also creates the need to develop an agenda for lifelong learning. Employers often make these 'skills gaps' known to the employers' organisation. Lobbying towards the government is often the answer, but real changes take a long time. The question is therefore mainly; what can employers themselves do to close the gap?

Bringing employers together

DECP has developed a number of easy-to-apply methods to identify specific skills gaps. What features are we talking about? Which competencies are missing? What's

going wrong? By bringing groups of employers from the same sector together and discussing these questions, insight is gained into the core of the problem and the causes. This year, DECP is conducting such workshops together with partner organisations (employer organisations) in countries such as Bolivia (hospitality), Zambia (various sectors) and Peru (agriculture) after having gained experience in several West African countries, Mongolia and the Philippines.



The Colombian employers' organisation ANDI organised in June 2022 three workshops together with DECP to explore skills gaps and define solutions

These methods bring employers together so that they jointly work towards conclusions. But they are also working together towards solutions, and that of course is the next step. For example, employers in the meat processing industry in Mongolia have jointly developed basic training aimed at hygienic working. This three-day training is provided by experts from various cooperating companies. Participation is mandatory for new employees, but also for people who already work at the affiliated companies. A short assessment is part of the process. The certificate that the participants receive is not (yet) recognized by the government. However, employers have confidence in it, which gives them better insight into this qualification of an employee who decides to change employer. Designing high-quality internships is one of the tools that DECP shares with its partners. As a result, companies and vocational schools are encouraged to cooperate structurally.



A delegation from the Mongolian mining industry recently visited the Netherlands to learn more about ecosystem development

Similar examples are known in Togo (welding, electrical engineering, refrigeration), Ivory Coast (machine maintenance) and Zambia (motor vehicle technology). It is clear that solving a number of specific issues in the field of skills development together requires a lot

from employers. For example, a study by the University of Maastricht** shows that a number of factors are crucial for employers to contribute successfully to the development of the sector in which they operate, these include medium-term vision, trust in others, dialogue and strategic leadership.

Democratic republic of Congo. A case study

It goes without saying that DECP is not the only organisation that contributes to improving the business climate in emerging countries by focusing on skills development issues and successful cooperation between various stakeholders. By regularly consulting with like-minded organisations, such as the Confederation of Danish Industry, NHO (Norway) and the International Council of Swedish Industry, NIR from Sweden, agendas can be aligned. If cooperation is desired, these organisations know where to find each other. In 2021, DECP and NIR worked together with HR company Sodeico in the DRC (Democratic Republic of Congo) in an event called Nkelo Bantu. Nkelo Bantu means 'human resources' or 'human capital' and is a platform created by Sodeico and NIR to provide a space for dialogue regarding issues such as skills development, sustainability, digitalization, leadership, diversity and inclusion and other topics related to the importance of human capital for the growth of business and society. One of the main challenges for companies in the DRC is to find skilled employees, and Sodeico realized this years ago working in the field of human resources. After seeing the benefit of dialogue in the workplace, the idea of developing the platform was born.

New partnerships

The target group is stakeholders in the labour market, such as companies, trade unions, public actors and civil society. The platform provides an opportunity for these actors to discuss best practices, create new partnerships and work together to promote the importance of upskilling and empowering the Congolese workforce. A company's greatest asset is its employees, which is why it is important to adopt a human-centred agenda to run business in a sustainable way. Nkelo Bantu aims to contribute to that through awareness raising around these topics. In this case, all competencies needed by employers to cooperate successfully with various stakeholders obviously come together.



Students of the Maastricht University present their findings with regards to the relationship between entrepreneurial ecosystems and competencies

Encouraging interaction

As a result of the participation of DECP in the Nkelo Bantu event, Randy Mpongo, a French student with Congolese parents,

decided to conduct a study on skills gaps in emerging countries. Coached by DECP and NIR experts, he was able to define a set of recommendations to Sodeico which allow it to encourage interaction between company decision makers and managers of VET schools and universities. These recommendations include establishing an advisory board for the school consisting of business decision makers, developing a high-quality internship programme with a guaranteed number of placements, guest teaching by company experts and using advanced equipment of companies for teaching purposes. Once again, these recommendations are concrete and practically feasible by employers united by an employer's organisation or sector organisation.

Social dialogue as a key to success

We can conclude that private employers can do a lot to close gaps between the supply and demand of skills, both for new employees and the existing workforce. But are they the key to structural solutions? No. Successes achieved by employers, often in collaboration with the employers' organisation, are usually limited to a sector or region. Scaling up best practices is a matter for government, in dialogue with employers' organisations, employee representatives and decision-makers of vocational schools and universities. And why shouldn't successes belong to everyone?



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* UNESCO Institute for Statistics. ILO : State of skills : The Democratic Republic of Congo

** Entrepreneurial ecosystems in emerging countries

<https://www.decp.nl/publications/entrepreneurial-ecosystems-in-emerging-countries-43370>

Link to DECP tools: <https://www.decp.nl/publications/skills-development-tools-43474>

NIR Näringslivets Internationella Råd
International Council of Swedish Industry



DUTCH EMPLOYERS COOPERATION PROGRAMME