

Youth of Niger: entrepreneurship between struggle and norms renegotiation

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PITCH

Niger's 10-year focus on youth entrepreneurship has achieved limited results. It needs to be better funded, coordinated and complemented by a more holistic industrial policy and significant improvements in education.

MOTIVATION & CONTEXT

The government's decade-long policy focus has been on youth entrepreneurship. The associated article¹ reflects on how well it is working, in a context of neo-liberal policies with declining state intervention, rising costs of access to education and health, and reduced recruitment of local youth for salaried public sector jobs. A major constraint on policy development is financing: Niger is down the league of tax/GDP ratio and receives relatively little aid per poor person. Is it possible under these circumstances to escape poverty?

METHODS

A multidisciplinary and mixed-methods approach² identifies how young people in Niger experience chronic poverty, sustained poverty escapes, or (re)-impoverishment. A qualitative dataset collected in Tahoua and Zinder re-

gions and national quantitative data consider how multiple drivers of poverty escapes or descents affect youth inclusion in labour markets, in this brief through entrepreneurship.

RESULTS

Poverty escapes by young adults depend mostly on accumulating capital and skill earlier in youth, either via inheritance (capital or skill), social networks, school or vocational education, informal training, migration³, or a combination of these channels. Major constraints on escaping poverty are the dearth of savings and the unaffordability of productive assets.

Poor educational endowments are combined with falling farm size and inheritance, attributed to population and soil fertility trends and exacerbated by climate change and a rising cost of living. Thus, productive returns in agriculture and the ability to raise livestock as a productive asset are both constrained.

Nevertheless, young women and men show significant efforts towards improving wellbeing, often participating in learning⁴ via second chance education programmes alongside own account activities or temporary wage

labour. The route out of poverty for many young men began by acquiring capital to fund migration transport costs through family support and own earnings, then using the earnings from migration to invest in a business on return back home. Success for young men is largely found in the transport sector, import-export and technology repair. Young women increase their labour market involvement (compared to their parents' generation) to meet the costs of basic needs, health costs, their responsibility to fund their children's primary education and to cope with male migration.

Women's escapes from poverty occur more frequently either when they negotiate or challenge social norms to exercise agency to work or receive training, or when young divorced women acquire assets (furniture, capital). Compared to adult women, young women trade in a greater scale and array of goods and services (grain and food processing, home-based work and sales), with a lucky few moving from petty trade to small businesses, focusing on diversification. Involvement in trade and the ability to invest in assets pre-marriage or post-divorce empowers women within the household.

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Geography Niger

Find out more about this project: <https://www.afd.fr/en/carte-des-projets/youth-inclusion-labour-markets-niger-evidence-tahoua-and-zinder>

Key words Labour inclusion, Gender, Poverty escapes

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There is support to female agency from senior adult men, who understand the challenges faced by young generations, and believe that young men should not domestically abuse young women who trade. Even so, going forward, additional means such as legal or counselling advice need to be available to more women experiencing abuse.

Young women and men both enjoy some degree of inclusion via social networks – savings and credit/tontines for women and groups for socializing and mutual aid (Fada) for men. Nevertheless, access to small amounts of capital to engage in self-employment are heavily constrained for poor youth. Assets are often rented as a result. Yet livelihoods can be precarious if based on renting assets, or taking loans, acquiring trading materials on credit, or doing commission-based

work rather than owning assets and working capital.

Enterprise opportunities are significantly more limited in rural compared to urban areas, and context-dependent (on the environment as well as institutional factors). This is a main barrier to inclusion. Work can be intermittent, with periods of several weeks/months of unemployment, when households are poor.

In urban areas, there are more occupational avenues available, but participation of traders in municipal urban planning is still limited, and new initiatives like the rehabilitation of the Dolé market in Zinder potentially disrupt livelihoods. Inclusive urbanisation is a future avenue to improve economic dynamics and the enabling environment for urban youth workers.

Apprenticeship has supported some livelihood trajectories, especially for processing of farm goods

into new products, or for mechanic or tailoring services. More sustained escapes from poverty are associated with NGO programmes that form women's credit and cooperative groups, enabling them to set prices as a group and diversify into additional businesses. However, selection of trainees may not focus on poor youth, there are instances of closed network selection and unavailability of training for many young men. Trainees also report having limited capacities to develop opportunities after training. The scope of programs could accordingly be expanded to be more holistic for enterprise development. NGOs could become catalysts for state-led efforts to include the poorest young women and men, linking to existing social protection mechanisms wherever possible and learning lessons from graduation programming.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- ▶ To promote youth inclusion, local institutions and climatic/environmental contexts, particularly in rural areas, need to be considered in the operationalisation of youth programs (e.g. combinations of education, training, employment opportunities and finance).
- ▶ NGO programs should combine second chance education, financial inclusion and post-training asset transfers. Care should be taken to invest in highly diverse technical training to avoid creating skill gluts. Young women could be encouraged to save more and invest in assets acquisition.
- ▶ Local-level governance should be supported to promote mentoring schemes in local labour markets (urban and rural) so that youth have information channels outside the family. Gender-sensitive mentoring should be promoted to support youth efforts to change gender and intergenerational norms.
- ▶ Social protection coverage should be expanded, and an employment guarantee programme should be developed to provide a floor for casual labour pay and increased work opportunities during the dry season, using social registry and electronic payments systems to minimise corruption.
- ▶ Value chains to support medium-sized businesses and provide business development services/infrastructure should be identified, to generate private sector employment closer to decent work than most of the informal jobs available, especially in rural areas.
- ▶ Notwithstanding current pressures on state budgets, public policy action plans must take more and better account of gender equality in their development and budgeting.

¹ da Corta, L., Diarra, A., Diwakar, V., Eichsteller, M., Harouna, A., and Poggi, C. (2021). Youth inclusion in labour markets in Niger: Gender dynamics and livelihoods. AFD Research Papers 216.

² Diarra, A., da Corta, L., Diwakar, V. and Harouna, A. (2021). Mixed methods approach for research: combining the LASDEL ethnographic methodology with CPAN's critical realist poverty dynamics methodology to explore youth employment inclusion in Niger. AFD Research Paper n.217. Paris: AFD.

³ Shepherd, A., Harouna, A., Poggi, C., Diwakar, V., Diarra, A., and da Corta, L. (2021). Youth of Niger: migration as a double-edged sword for labour inclusion. AFD Policy Dialogues n.53.

⁴ Shepherd, A., Harouna, A., Poggi, C., Diwakar, V., Diarra, A., and da Corta, L. (2021). Youth of Niger: schooling and training as useful tools for inclusion. AFD Policy Dialogues n.52.