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TITLE:

Engaging Youth in Service: Toward an Alternative Large-Scale Youth Employment Strategy

ABSTRACT:

This paper considers the range of youth employment intervention strategies aimed at developing work skills and strengthening youth employability. It presents youth service programs as an innovative and complementary alternative to existing strategies, arguing that, when designed properly and with appropriate consideration of country context, youth service is a highly adaptable means of addressing many of the concerns and obstacles facing countries along the development spectrum.

Drawing from countries' overall experiences using the variety of job/skills training programs and vocation-focused education models available, the paper presents ways in which youth service programs designed to strengthen youth employability can overcome obstacles that are more difficult to address with existing strategies, such as dependency of program effectiveness on a strong economy, the feasibility of aiming for long-term or gradual impact goals, and the implementation of program activities in sectors where youth are most likely to seek long-term employment opportunities.

The paper then reviews the forms in which youth service has been used as an employment strategy, the experiences that countries have had in scaling up youth service initiatives, and the potential uses of youth service for growth and employment in sectors such as healthcare, the environment, peace-building, and information and communications technology.

A discussion of the strengths of youth service as a youth employment intervention policy looks to the involvement of unemployed and often out-of-school youth in skills-building and community-valued projects that not only build participants' human capital, but also enhance their employability in quality positions upon completion of their service. The weight of these strengths is considered in light of both the shortage of formal assessments of youth service programs as well as the potential challenges to their effectiveness, including variation in socio-political and economic context, scaling up in different economic and developmental contexts, and engaging multiple stakeholders from the private, public, and international sectors.

The paper concludes with recommendations on how to invest in effective youth service programs and policies as a way to generate skills and enhance employability, and on the need to further evaluate the replicability of such programs at the national level.