

# BRINGING YOUTH INTO LABOR MARKETS:

Public-Private  
Efforts in Mexico

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# INTRODUCTION

Latin America and the Caribbean weathered the global economic slowdown relatively well, with many countries—buoyed by sound macroeconomic policies and high commodity prices—registering GDP growth that helped the region to become a leader in the world economic recovery. This return to growth has had a positive influence on employment, and most forecasts predict unemployment numbers to continue dipping slightly in 2012.

But these advances mask the challenges facing the region's youth as they seek to enter formal labor markets. Overall, in a region where 16-to-24-year-olds comprise nearly 20 percent of the population, youth unemployment is nearly triple that of the adult population. Low levels of education and vocational training, a lack of prior work experience and inflexible labor laws are all barriers to youth employment. The data is worse for those at lower income levels; unemployment or underemployment is the reality for 60 percent of youth with nine years or less of education.

This raises serious policy implications for business and government. The growing phenomenon of *ninis*—youth who neither study nor work (*ni trabajan, ni estudiant*)—means that employers struggle to find qualified workers while governments grapple with the potential short- and long-term economic consequences of a lost group of workers. According to ILO Regional Director for Latin America and the Caribbean Elizabeth Tinoco, “The economic and social progress of recent years is unsustainable if policymakers don't face the challenge of creating better opportunities for young people.”

Besides the bleak prospects for their socioeconomic future and ability to play vital roles in the region's growth, these youth are at a higher risk of joining gangs or of being forced to migrate to look for new opportunities—both challenges faced in Mexico.

Young workers face a unique set of widely recognized employment challenges. Low levels of education and vocational training, a lack of prior work experience and inflexible labor laws are all barriers to youth employment. Further, labor market studies show that firms often lay off young workers first, since companies have invested less time and money in their training and they possess fewer firm-specific skills.

Successful efforts to reduce youth joblessness require a multifaceted approach. Governments, for example, can promote youth employment by codifying tax incentives that reward companies for hiring young adults, by funding public works projects that employ young workers, and by reforming

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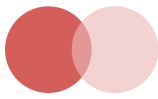
school curricula to more accurately reflect the skills demanded by the labor market. But effective solutions must involve private-sector participation and public-private dialogue on how to improve labor market conditions.

That is why this country report focuses on private-sector-led initiatives that address three of the key challenges for reducing youth unemployment and underemployment in Mexico: narrowing the mismatch between the skills young workers possess and those labor markets demand; fostering opportunities for entrepreneurship; and designing efforts to specifically support at-risk/disenfranchised youth.

Rather than analyzing corporate social responsibility programs and other philanthropic efforts, this study focused on programs driven both by the benefits to the business bottom line—whether in productivity, sales and/or marketing—and the corresponding social value for the community at large and, in particular, young workers.

The contextual implications of narcotrafficking and gang violence in Mexico add urgency to these discussions; unemployed young adults are ripe for recruitment by drug trafficking organizations and gangs. Although this country report focuses on Mexico, efforts discussed here can be adapted elsewhere. That is why the Americas Society recommends the following:

- Governments and the private sector must establish measures that prove the effectiveness of successful private-sector initiatives to facilitate their replication and scalability.
- The private and public sectors must provide incentives, such as guaranteed internships and apprenticeships or education scholarships, for youth to ensure they study the skills that employers most demand.
- Nationally recognized accreditation systems in technical and non-technical skills should be created so that young job-seekers and employers can verify employment preparedness.
- Employers must reverse the bias and discrimination that prevents the hiring of at-risk youth.



# MEXICO:

## Businesses Opening the Door while Trying to Keep Talent at Home

Of all the major economies in Latin America, Mexico's was arguably the most adversely affected by the global economic downturn. Close ties to the beleaguered U.S. economy and a major drop-off in tourism revenues due to drug violence and other factors led to a 6.1 percent contraction of GDP from 2008 to 2009. Growth recovered to 5.4 percent in 2010 and was projected to reach approximately 3.8 percent in 2011. Despite the return to growth, overall the urban unemployment rate of 5 percent has yet to return to pre-2009 levels.

As in much of Latin America, unemployment among youth is 2.4 times higher than that of the adult population, and there remain major challenges to youth labor market access. This is significant in a country where nearly one-third of the total population falls within the 12–29 age range. In 2011, while the youth unemployment rate dropped more than the adult rate in Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Panama, and Uruguay, in Mexico youth unemployment actually increased while adult unemployment decreased. At the same time, in urban areas 1 in 10 Mexicans between the ages of 15 and 24 was unable to find work, compared to 1 in 25 adults.<sup>1</sup>

According to a 2005 survey, *Encuesta Nacional de Juventud*, a challenge for young workers who find jobs is that the positions are low paid and often incompatible with young workers' skills sets.<sup>2</sup> Of young people who found work, 27 percent said that they only accepted the job because it was available. This figure highlights that, when faced with the need to work, young people will accept any job regardless of whether it is the position they desire or are prepared for academically. This carries broad implications for their career trajectory.

Mexico's recent lackluster economic performance and the limitations of its public education system have led to an increase in the number of young people who neither study nor work (referred to as *ninīs*) in the formal sector—an estimated 7.5 million young Mexicans.

This situation is complex. Mexican youth are heterogeneous. Their opportunity to develop work skills, their access to educational opportunities and their exposure to risks such as violence vary by income level, geographic distribution and gender.

Mexico's poor economic performance over the last decade is often blamed

for its challenges in bringing job-seeking youth into the labor market. But other factors also limit labor market access: low education rates (more than one-third of the population is estimated to be without primary or secondary education); the skills disconnect between higher education and formal labor markets; the overall high rate of unemployment (creating greater competition among job applicants); the prevalence of informal markets; and a high rate of teen pregnancy.

Another employment problem facing young people is their limited or complete lack of access to social security. According to the ILO, the number of Mexican youth in the informal sector who do not receive social security and other benefits established in the *Ley Federal de Trabajo* (Federal Work Law) reached 3.5 million in 2008 and 3.7 million in 2009.



## Public Sector and Legal Framework

In response to high youth unemployment rates, Mexico's federal government has created a number of programs focused on young people. The *Programa del Primer Empleo* (First Job Program), launched in March 2007, is designed to incorporate recent graduates from universities and technical and professional schools into formal job markets. The program uses tax incentives to encourage companies to create new permanent positions for young adults who lack formal work experience. The deductions apply to Mexico's *Impuesto Sobre la Renta* (ISR) tax and provide for a 40-percent reduction on general ISR rates. The program also allows eligible employers to avoid paying employee-employer quota fees for the first year they participate in the program.

To qualify for tax rebates, the employer must comply with a series of government requirements. Among them is the requirement that new jobs be active for at least 36 continuous months. Employers must also register employees with the Mexican Social Security Institute and provide legal benefits to all employees.

According to President Felipe Calderón, the program has benefited 83,000 individuals and is now extended through 2012.<sup>3</sup> Still, critics including Presburger Solomon, president of Mexico's largest business association, *Confederación de Cámaras Industriales*, said in February 2011 that the program is effectively "dead" because it creates few real hiring incentives for businesses.

Another program, *Bécate*, encourages unemployed and underemployed youth (older than age 16) to sign up for short-term training courses. The program is divided into different classes that try to fulfill students' specific

needs. For example, the *Capacitación en la Práctica Laboral* (Practical Work Training) course focuses on unemployed young adults between the ages of 16 and 29 who have recently graduated from a technical or professional school, but who require more work experience to enter the formal labor market. *Bécate* provides short- and long-term benefits to participants, offering a 2,000-peso (\$160) stipend for students who complete the course and helping students throughout their job searches.

*Jóvenes con Oportunidades* (Youth with Opportunities), launched in 2003, provides financial incentives for students to complete *la educación media superior* (last three years of high school) in less than four years and before they reach age 22. They are also required to register with *Programa Oportunidades* and submit proof of school attendance every semester. It is popular nationwide and has benefited more than 790,000 people.



## The Three Cases – Facilitating Inclusiveness

Still, the range of Mexican government programs to boost youth employment has not contained jobless rates. That is why one of the main goals of this research is to identify private-sector-led initiatives that facilitate youth labor market access and complement existing government efforts to combat the problem. Each initiative addresses different barriers to formal job markets including: skill-building, which helps young people better insert themselves into the labor market; the promotion of entrepreneurship; and efforts to increase access to labor markets for more vulnerable populations, such as women and repatriated migrants. Given the similar youth unemployment challenges and the existence of specific groups of disenfranchised youth in both Mexico and El Salvador, this section—as well as the following one on El Salvador—looks at programs in each of the three areas described above. The cases are presented under cross-cutting themes to provide a comparative snapshot of how each challenge is being addressed in each country.

### EDUCATION/TRAINING TO ADDRESS THE SKILLS MISMATCH – MANPOWERGROUP AND CISCO SYSTEMS, INC.

Despite an abundance of jobless young workers in Mexico, 2010 survey data from more than 2,000 Mexican companies show that 43 percent of employers report difficulty in filling open positions—well above the survey’s regional average of 34 percent.<sup>4</sup> This applies not only to highly skilled positions for which only experienced adult workers would qualify, but also to positions such

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as sales representatives, office support staff and receptionist positions that would appear well-suited to younger applicants.

Among the greatest obstacles to fuller employment in the region are the gaps that exist between the skills young workers acquire in school and those in highest demand. Helping young workers develop skills that allow them greater access to formal job markets is a fundamental missing link in the labor supply-demand chain. According to survey data, companies often view young applicants as underprepared for formal jobs not only in terms of their hard skills, but also “soft skills” such as emotional intelligence and communication abilities.

ManpowerGroup and Cisco Systems, Inc. are striving to bridge these skills gaps through programs that provide hands-on and/or virtual training and accreditation. ManpowerGroup’s *Vinculación Académica* (Academic Linkage) works to interpret labor market demand in real time and connect the needs of employers to graduates of Mexican academic institutions with the ultimate goal of reducing talent scarcity in the labor market. To do this, the program forges connections between government employment promotion agencies, public and private secondary schools, universities and technical and/or vocational schools, and hundreds of private companies in ManpowerGroup’s databases.

ManpowerGroup’s program works from different angles: the first relates to the role of the company as a potential space for training, professional practice and social service that guides youth and provides them with a platform for development. Additionally, the role of the government—through different federal authorities such as the Secretariat of Public Education—can certify young people and educational institutions which, in conjunction with ManpowerGroup’s business units, can obtain information and develop plans of action and curricula in line with what companies are seeking.

ManpowerGroup offers students enrolled at all *Vinculación Académica*-affiliated schools information on local labor market demands, advice for



improving their employability and the ability to participate in jobs fairs and talent-search programs. The company also works with affiliated schools to help develop strategies to offer coursework and certifications in competencies that are in high demand by the local labor market. To date, the program has placed 14,395 young people in mid-level jobs and 8,178 people in more advanced positions throughout Mexico.

Cisco Systems, Inc.'s Networking Academy is a comprehensive information and communications technology training program that teaches students how to design, build and secure computer networks. It combines live and Web-based classes, student evaluations, instructor support and training, and exam preparation for industry-standard technology certifications.

Young workers' lack of accreditation and certifiable skills is one of the biggest barriers they face in entering formal job markets. According to a 2008 global survey of IT managers and recruiters conducted by Cisco, certifications follow university degrees as the single most important qualification used to determine job readiness, and are at the top of the list when determining a candidate's ability to perform a job.

The Cisco Networking Academy is global—classes are available at approximately 9,000 locations in 165 countries around the world—but Cisco in Mexico has made unique efforts to involve disadvantaged youth. First launched in Mexico in 1998 in collaboration with *Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México* (UNAM), the Academy has since established programs with more than 520 institutions nationwide and offered courses to nearly 160,000 students.

To reach students, the Academy establishes partnerships with schools, universities, businesses, nonprofits, and government organizations and works to customize coursework to meet each partner's needs. Cisco provides the curriculum, teacher training, support and a virtual community, while the educational institution provides instructors, physical space and Internet access. Curricula range from basic classes that introduce students to the fundamentals of networking to advanced skills for installing, configuring and repairing major commercial and public-sector networks.

Students who complete Networking Academy-affiliated coursework are often eligible to test for industry-standard certifications that are widely recognized by employers in the technology sector. According to Cisco, 22,000 Networking Academy students have gone on to achieve accreditation after their studies.

Student access to the Networking Academy varies. For instance, in the

case of the Academy's ongoing program at UNAM, students are required to apply for advanced Cisco-affiliated classes that are only open to applicants with outstanding academic records. Elsewhere, such as in secondary schools and in partnerships with vocational schools, enrollment is left open.

But, beyond more conventional partnerships with universities, institutes and vocational schools, the Academy in Mexico also has established alliances with businesses, government agencies and community organizations to expand the reach of their programs and to support young people who have limited access to educational resources.

One such Academy initiative began in 2008 in collaboration with the national Secretariat of Health's *Centros de Integración Juvenil* (Youth Integration Centers), which provide treatment to young adults who are struggling with alcoholism and addiction. According to Rebeca De La Vega, a Cisco Networking Academy administrator, the basic classes are open to students nearing the end of their treatment periods and are part of a larger health ministry effort to help young addicts reintegrate into society through education. Academy classes are currently available at 10 centers in Mexico City and at centers in San Luis de Potosí and in the north-central state of Hidalgo. De La Vega says that approximately 100 students have completed the programs and that there are cases of students who have become self-employed—and even started businesses—as a result of the program. Cisco plans to expand its collaboration with the Ministry of Health.<sup>5</sup>

In addition to working directly with government ministries and with local, state and federal governments, the Academy has partnered with civic groups, such as Mexico's Boy and Girl Scouts. Its collaboration with *Fundación Código Ayuda*, which works with homeless youth, has resulted in basic computer classes being offered as part of the foundation's outreach strategy.

Mexico suffers from significant skills gaps across a number of sectors. The Networking Academy's more than decade-long experience training Mexico's next generation of networking as well as information and communications technology professionals has helped thousands of young workers. Still, demand for workers in the technology sector and elsewhere continues to outstrip supply—even in an environment of high youth joblessness. The Networking Academy is one clear example of an effective and scalable program that engages private companies, national and regional governments, as well as civil society actors to facilitate youth labor market access. But scaling up training efforts will require major public- and private-sector investments in education and skills training.

“**ManpowerGroup works with schools to offer coursework and certifications in competencies that are in high demand by the local labor market.**”

## **DEVELOPING ENTREPRENEURIAL SKILLS IN VULNERABLE COMMUNITIES — DANONE/SEMILLA**

For much of Mexico’s young labor force, informal employment is the only available option. This is especially true for young women. In fact, 45 percent of Mexican women between the ages of 15 and 24 who have managed to find jobs are employed in the informal sector and lack access to the basic social safety nets that formal employment provides. Nationwide, 12.5 million Mexicans do not have access to any form of social safety net.

Creating formal jobs—particularly for young women living in vulnerable circumstances—was the motivation behind the creation of *Semilla*, a Mexican NGO launched in 2007, as the third party in a partnership with the NGO *Cauce Ciudadano* and the dairy conglomerate Danone de Mexico. *Semilla* was designed to create a win-win relationship between a NGO with close ties to marginalized communities on the northern outskirts of Mexico City and the for-profit subsidiary of French yogurt and dairy products giant Danone. Under the program, *Semilla* committed to the recruitment and training of Danone yogurt and dairy product distributors, who would sell door-to-door in neighborhoods underserved by Danone’s existing distribution networks. In return, Danone agreed to create formal-sector jobs that paid a base salary, plus 12-to 15-percent commissions on individual distributors’ sales. Ninety percent of distributors are women and over 60 percent are under 30 years old. All distributors are formally employed, and thereby eligible for social security and other social safety nets. *Cauce Ciudadano* played a crucial role in initial recruitment efforts and provided basic skills training to *Semilla* distributors.

What began as a nonprofit initiative in 2007 to create formal, entry-level employment for about 150 distributors has since involved into a financially sustainable, symbiotic business partnership between *Semilla* and Danone. In September 2011, *Semilla* converted its legal status into a multi-tiered, for-profit enterprise. At present, more than 450 employees earn 4,500 to 5,000 pesos (\$350 to \$390) per month for 7- to 8-hour workdays at three different

employment levels. Tier-one employees are still the on-the-ground distributors upon which the enterprise was founded, but the company now also has positions for more experienced workers, who handle employee training and business administration. Through this program, Danone has expanded its distribution to five municipalities.

Since *Semilla* has proven both effective at creating new jobs and at turning profits, plans are in the works to expand the program. According to Carlos Cruz, director of *Cauce Ciudadano*, market analysis is currently being performed to target new communities; the long-term goal is to employ up to 4,000 people by 2016.<sup>6</sup> Plans are also underway to expand the trilateral relationship to include new civil society organizations, as well as state and federal government offices. Based on the program's success, Danone de Mexico received the Mexican Center for Philanthropy's 2011 award for Best Practices of Corporate Social Responsibility in the category of Community Links.

### More on Entrepreneurship

According to the 2005 *Encuesta Nacional de Juventud*, only 22 percent of Mexican youth have considered starting their own business. Of the few that have tried, 53 percent were unable to start their business, 30 percent began operations only to see the business fail, and only 14 percent managed to set up the business and keep it running. Entrepreneurship is a well-established generator of employment worldwide, which means that Mexico's survey data have important implications. Mexican youth, on average, appear to be less entrepreneurial than their regional counterparts, and, of the small percentage of young entrepreneurs who do start business, only a very small fraction succeed.

Mexico's *Fundación ProEmpleo* is one successful support mechanism for young entrepreneurs. Created by the business community to accelerate job creation, *Fundación ProEmpleo* focuses on developing new businesses that strengthen gross domestic product, boost nationwide productivity, improve the quality of life, and help to build a culture where people are well equipped to be entrepreneurs.

Through training that includes topics from human development to business-plan assembly, young people have the chance to move on to an incubator or, in the case of companies already created, to form part of the Center of Business Development. This is a valuable step toward publicizing their work and participating in the Mexican federal government's *Semana PYME* (Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises Week), an important event for small businesses. The final stage

of the program aims to keep the business up to date through workshops with businesspeople who offer free consultations and advice.

After 16 years of operation, *Fundación ProEmpleo* has so far empowered more than 47,432 entrepreneurs who have managed to start and improve more than 18,000 small businesses. Nearly 30 percent of these businesspeople are between 18 and 30 years of age.

## TARGETING DISENFRANCHISED YOUTH (RETURNING YOUTH MIGRANTS) — MATT

*Yo Soy México* was created by *Mexicanos y Americanos Todos Trabajando*, (Mexicans and Americans Thinking Together—MATT), a binational organization created in 2006 to strengthen U.S.–Mexico relations. Launched in 2011, *Yo Soy México* is the first civil society program to work with federal and state governments as well as private businesses to help find jobs for Mexican migrants that have recently returned from the United States. In the fourth quarter of 2007, for example, return migration totaled 133,490, while it dropped slightly but remained high during the same period in 2008 (95,238).<sup>7</sup>

The program is specifically designed for young Mexicans (half of all returning migrants are between ages 17 and 29); the goal is to connect those who return with job opportunities in their communities of origin or, when necessary, in other communities where better employment options exist. MATT actively recruits prospective returning migrants from Mexican government repatriation centers in the northern Mexican states of Mexicali and Tijuana.

Although the *Instituto Nacional de Migración* (National Institute of Migration) and some U.S.-based organizations have attempted to collect statistics about returning migrants in Mexico, it is quite challenging to collect data about past employment. This makes it difficult to connect these job-seeking youth with available positions. MATT and the *Centro de Investigación para el Desarrollo* (Center of Research for Development—CIDAC) have recently developed a quantitative study to better understand this profile and to facilitate young returning Mexicans' entry into the job market. Most recently, MATT developed a partnership with Texas A&M University to develop an online English teaching and certification system to help certify the language skills of returning migrants in order to increase their appeal to potential employers.

Although the initiative only began last year, the results are promising. To date, *Yo Soy México* has managed to forge alliances with companies such as the steel mining corporation Altos Hornos de México, where 23 recently

returned migrants are working as welders and an additional 14 people are currently in training. Similarly, the government of the state of Puebla is considering a strategy to place 48 repatriated citizens, and the *Confederación Patronal de la República Mexicana* (Mexican Employers' Association) has an additional 15 young people in training. In the last six months, MATT has collected employment history information and skills evaluations from over 3,200 returning migrants and is working with business associations and the *Instituto Nacional de Migración* to expand *Yo Soy México's* employer network.

*Yo Soy México* addresses an important labor market challenge for recently returning Mexicans: more complete work histories and skill profiles increase the likelihood that migrants will find jobs when they return to their communities. According to the CIDAC study, Mexico ranks third globally in regard to the difficulty in finding talent, with a high demand for technicians, chauffeurs, production-line operators, and laborers. Through the studies it has carried out and the courses it teaches in conjunction with businesses, MATT is trying gradually to close the gap between employees and employers.



## **The Three Cases – Assessing the Case Studies**

It is widely recognized that there is a major disconnect between Mexican companies' labor needs and the available workforce. This affects various sectors, among which education and business stand out. Evidence also suggests that the skills currently being developed through the national education system are not improving the employability of young people. The programs featured here by companies such as ManpowerGroup and Cisco Systems, Inc. have found a useful entry point for addressing the problem by promoting linkages between businesses and the education system. That said, the government also plays a fundamental role through public education and public-private dialogue on the development of new curricula, and professional certification systems for young people would enhance these programs and provide a foundation for the reduction of skills gaps at the state and federal levels.

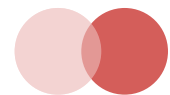
Unequal distribution of wealth is a top challenge for Mexico. Mass migration to the U.S. and elsewhere is one consequence of the country's poverty and inequality. Although net migration is now hovering around zero due to a lack of opportunities in the United States, it will likely pick up again as the U.S. economy continues to recover. Given the cyclical reality of migration, government, business and civil society each have a role in facilitating the reintegration of returning migrants by helping them maximize the skills and work

experience developed while living outside the country. In this sense, MATT, through its *Yo Soy México* program, is an innovator in its efforts to catalogue the employment profiles and work histories of the returning migrant community. MATT's plans to expand the services it offers and diversify its relationship with state and federal government actors are crucial to larger scale efforts to reintegrate the returning migrant population.

Similarly, Danone has revolutionized the paradigm of corporate social responsibility through its social investment in the creation of formal jobs for young women of limited resources. Other companies should analyze the Danone-*Semilla* business model given its benefit to both the business itself and the community at large.

Mexico is also characterized by low levels of entrepreneurship, with one challenge being that young entrepreneurs face obstacles such a lack of access to credit. *Fundación ProEmpleo*'s programs offer a response to these challenges, betting on the ability of young people to develop their own ideas, and accompanying them in the process through investment, tools and advice on how to create a successful business.

Still, it is important to note that the challenges facing Mexico's youth are not specific to Mexico alone. Skills training, entrepreneurship and the creation of opportunities for at-risk/disenfranchized youth (in this case migrants) that face unique challenges in gaining decent employment are challenges seen across the Americas. The following section looks at what is being done to address these issues in El Salvador, another country that is highly dependent on the U.S. market for its trade and economic growth.



# ENDNOTES

- 1 Mexico's national age classification for youth is different than that of most countries in the region. See *Panorama Laboral*, International Labour Organization, 2011.
- 2 *Encuesta Nacional de Juventud*, Instituto Mexicano de la Juventud, Secretaría de Educación Pública.
- 3 "Extiende Calderón programa del Primer Empleo," *El Milenio*, November 11, 2011.
- 4 *Manpower Employment Outlook Survey: Mexico*, 2010.
- 5 Phone Interview with Rebeca De La Vega, Cisco Systems, Inc., February 2, 2012.
- 6 Phone Interview, Carlos Cruce, *Cauce Ciudadano*, February 1, 2012.
- 7 Declining Return Migration from the United States to Mexico in the Late-2000s Recession: A Research Note, Michael S. Rendall, RAND, February 2010.