



► Youth employment policies

Patterns and trends in two unique data sets

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ISBN 9789220404553 (print), ISBN 9789220404560 (web PDF), ISBN 9789220404577 (epub), ISBN 9789220404584 (mobi), ISBN 9789220404591 (html). ISSN 2708-3438 (print), ISSN 2708-3446 (digital)

<https://doi.org/10.54394/QIUB5931>

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Authorization for publication: Sangheon Lee, Director of the Employment Policy Department

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Suggested citation:

Chacaltana, J., Barcucci, V., Moreno, M. 2024. *Youth employment policies: Patterns and trends in two unique data sets*, ILO Working Paper 108 (Geneva, ILO). <https://doi.org/10.54394/QIUB5931>

Abstract

Youth employment challenges are always a critical concern for policymakers. There is recurring and mounting evidence that labour market challenges, such as unemployment, informality, lack of social protection and inactivity, disproportionately affect youths. This complex decision-making process involves navigating the intricacies of crafting policies tailored to the unique challenges confronting youths in labour markets. In this paper, we look at the process for elaborating the youth employment policies found in two unique data compiled by the ILO. These data sets contain summaries of the policy documentation, including the rationale, main characteristics and evolution over time. Through this analysis, we aim to identify some policy gaps and highlight areas for consideration of future youth employment policies addressing evolving demands of modern labour markets.

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▶ Introduction

Youth employment challenges are always a critical concern for policymakers. There is recurring and mounting evidence that labour market challenges, such as unemployment, informality, lack of social protection and inactivity, disproportionately affect youths.¹ Moreover, an increasing number of governments complement their national development frameworks and employment policies with policies and programmes that target young people.

In the realm of measures singling out youth employment, a universal consensus on design and implementation remains elusive. The ongoing debate revolves around questions such as whether youth-specific interventions are justified because, as some analysts argue, concentrating efforts on cultivating a favourable investment and business climate would organically generate jobs for all persons seeking work. Should governments choose to intervene, there are other questions, for example: What are appropriate policy options and how do you determine the methods for their effective application? This complex decision-making process involves navigating the intricacies of crafting policies tailored to the unique challenges confronting youths in labour markets. A pivotal inquiry should arise when evaluating the outcomes of these interventions: Did these policies achieve their intended results? Is feedback from evaluation implemented? This question fuels extensive discussions concerning the effectiveness of such interventions and their direct impact on youth employment. Nevertheless, this question is seldom investigated.

In this paper, we look at the process for elaborating the youth employment policies found in two unique data sets, one of which stopped being accessible in 2017. We review empirical data sets containing summaries of the policy documentation, including the rationale, main characteristics and evolution over time. The International Labour Organization (ILO) compiled the two data sets: first using its database on Youth Employment Policies and Legislation, or YouthPOL, and then its Employment Policy Gateway, both of which are comprehensive global digital repositories that contain documents from different time periods. This analysis revealed some interesting patterns and allows to identify some policy gaps or areas that could be considered in the next generation of youth employment policies, which are needed in the rapidly evolving labour markets of the twenty-first century.

¹ See, for example, ILO 2022 or Chacaltana and Dasgupta 2021.

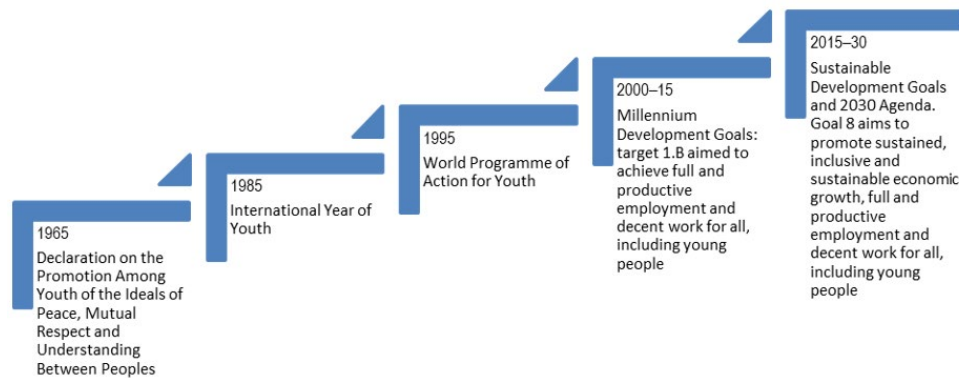
► 1 Youth employment policies: The global debate

In general, the historical evolution of youth employment policy reflects a long-running global debate that started over the role of young people in our societies and eventually became more about their presence in our economies.² A glimpse of the global debate can be observed in the international development policy agenda in the UN's and the ILO's normative work and policy positions.

The UN discussions have increasingly recognized the importance of addressing youth employment challenges and have highlighted the need for integrated and holistic approaches to those youth employment challenges, covering education, skills development, gender equality and social protection. The topic of youth employment remains a priority in UN policy discussions, with ongoing efforts to implement strategies that can empower young people economically and socially.

Of course, there has been an evolution in these approaches (figure 1). The 1965 Declaration on the Promotion Among Youth of the Ideals of Peace, Mutual Respect and Understanding Between Peoples³ considered young people as the world's hope for a future of peace and tolerance. They basically needed education to instil in them the ideals of non-discrimination and training to help them "acquire higher moral qualities". In this context, youth were mostly considered passive recipients.

► **Figure 1. United Nations youth-related instruments**



Source: Authors' own elaboration.

This perspective shifted drastically over subsequent decades, and in the Barcelona Statement of 1985,⁴ the main messages of the first International Year of Youth highlighted the importance of youth participation in decision-making processes as well as in the implementation of initiatives that target them. In addition, it advocated for the integration of youths' concerns into national and international development strategies.

² See, for instance, Charles and Jameson-Charles 2014.

³ [Declaration on the Promotion Among Youth of the Ideals of Peace, Mutual Respect and Understanding Between Peoples](#), adopted by the Twentieth Session of the General Assembly of the United Nations, 1390th plenary meeting, 7 December 1965.

⁴ [Barcelona Statement](#), adopted by the World Congress on Youth, Barcelona, Spain, 8–15 July 1985.

In 1995, the UN adopted the World Programme of Action for Youth to the Year 2000 and Beyond, which recognized youth employment as a priority area and stated the willingness of Member States to “increase the quality and quantity of opportunities available to young people for full, effective and constructive participation in society”. In the area of employment, a proposal for action in the programme document stated: “Governments should promote access to work through integrated policies that enable the creation of new and quality jobs for young people and that facilitate access to those jobs.”⁵ This gave international legitimacy to what later became the approach of reference in supporting youth development at the national level.⁶

The 15-year Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) that the UN adopted in 2000 included a focus on youth employment. Moreover, their successor, the ongoing Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) adopted in 2015, place even stronger emphasis on youth employment. In particular, the SDG framework includes a target related to youth employment policy, stating that “by 2030, develop and operationalize a global strategy for youth employment and implement the Global Jobs Pact of the International Labour Organization”.⁷

The ILO has a long history (table 1) of addressing employment challenges for young people, which is reflected in the progression of its normative instruments (conventions, recommendations and resolutions). Its early twentieth-century responses were characterised by a rights-based approach, with several conventions speaking to the fundamental decent work deficits in the labour market, in particular regarding minimum age, night work and medical examinations.

The focus shifted beginning in 1970, with Recommendation No. 136 calling for special youth schemes for development. Five years later, the Human Resources Development Convention, 1975 (No. 142) required “each Member shall adopt and develop comprehensive and co-ordinated policies and programmes of vocational guidance and vocational training, closely linked with employment, in particular through public employment services”. It also insisted that “[t]he policies and programmes shall encourage and enable all persons, on an equal basis and without any discrimination whatsoever, to develop and use their capabilities for work in their own best interests and in accordance with their own aspirations, account being taken of the needs of society.”⁸ Most recently (2023), Recommendation No. 208 on quality apprenticeships discusses the conditions under which Member States should promote and protect apprenticeships.

The ILO's resolutions regarding youth employment have also evolved to recognize the importance of investing in young people. The first resolutions, in 1945 and 1953, focused on the protection and problems of young people. In the 1970s, a new perspective emerged considered youths to be active agents and drivers of economic growth. Note that in 1964, the ILO adopted the Employment Policy Convention No. 122 that called on Member States to “declare and pursue, as a major goal, an active policy designed to promote full, productive and freely chosen employment” with “a view to stimulating economic growth and development, raising levels of living, meeting manpower requirements and overcoming unemployment and underemployment”.⁹ Moreover, in 1969, the ILO launched the World Employment Programme, which included specific projects and policies targeting youth employment challenges in developing countries.¹⁰ Freedman (2005) characterized these events as the origins – at least in the ILO – of a broader approach that later concluded in the idea of an integrated approach to youth policy, as stated in the 2012 resolution

⁵ [World Programme of Action for Youth to the Year 2000 and Beyond](#), adopted by the Fiftieth Session of the General Assembly of the United Nations, 13 March 1996, p. ii and p. 46.

⁶ In 1998, a resolution proclaiming 12 August as International Youth Day was adopted by the [World Conference of Ministers Responsible for Youth](#), in Lisbon, Portugal. That recommendation was endorsed by the 54th session of the General Assembly, in its resolution *A/RES/54/120* entitled “Policies and programmes involving youth” (December 1999).

⁷ See [target 8. b](#).

⁸ See [Article 1](#).

⁹ See [Article 1](#).

¹⁰ See ILO and WEP 2020.

that adopted a call for action in response to the youth employment crisis.¹¹ The ILO (2019b) argued in its call for more investment in the institutions, policies and strategies that “will support people through future of work transitions”: “Supporting people through these transitions will expand their choices and provide the security to cope with change.” Vega (2022) added that “only if we succeed with young people, will we have the future of work we want”.

► **Table 1. ILO youth employment-related instruments**

Year	Instrument and title
Conventions	
1919	Minimum Age (Industry) Convention No. 5
1919	Night Work of Young Persons (Industry) Convention No. 6
1946	Medical Examination of Young Persons (Non-Industrial Occupations) Convention No. 78
1946	Night Work of Young Persons (Non-Industrial Occupations) Convention No. 79
1948	Night Work of Young Persons (Industry) Convention (Revised) No. 90
1964	Employment Policy Convention No. 122
1965	Medical Examination of Young Persons (Underground Work) Convention No. 124
1973	Minimum Age Convention No. 138
1975	Human Resources Development Convention No. 142
Recommendations	
1935	Unemployment (Young Persons) Recommendation No. 45
1965	Conditions of Employment of Young People Recommendation No. 125
1970	Special Youth Schemes for Development Recommendation No. 136
2023	Quality Apprenticeships Recommendation No. 208
Resolutions	
1945	Resolution concerning the protection of children and young workers
1953	Resolution concerning the protection of employment and living conditions of young persons
1959	Resolution concerning the problems of young workers
1960	Resolution concerning the protection of employment and living conditions of young persons (reinforced)
1978	Resolution concerning youth employment
1979	Resolution concerning youth employment and work
1983	Resolution concerning young people and the ILO's contribution to International Year of Youth
1986	Resolution concerning young people
1998	Resolution concerning youth employment
2012	Resolution [concerning] The youth employment crisis: A call for action

Source: Authors' compilation based on Vega 2022, Freedman 2005 and LABORDOC database.

¹¹ Other milestones mentioned by Freedman (2005) are the book by O'Higgins (2001) on *Youth Employment and Employment Policy* and the 2004 Tripartite Meeting on Youth Employment.

▶ 2 Patterns and trends in policymaking

How have these global messages influenced policymaking related to youth employment? Our analysis of the two policy and strategy data sets revealed patterns and trends that we highlight here. Although we analysed the data sets developed in the Employment Policy Gateway (in the section on youth employment strategies) and its predecessor, YouthPOL, we present the analysis of each separately, in line with the availability of each data set. We had accessed the YouthPOL data in 2017, just before its online presence shut down.¹² The database operated from 1997 to 2016. In 2017, we accessed a summarising data set of policy documents for a number of countries that dated up to 2015, with around half of them dating after 2010. The second database, Employment Policy Gateway, became active online in 2021 and the summarised policies for all ILO member states and that data refers to policy documents that remain active.

We focus on policies although much of the international discussion on youth employment is based on programmes. In most cases, policies have a broader scope than programmes because they can involve many programmes or interventions, provisions for coordination, coherence mechanisms, etc. If we want to constructively prepare youth employment for future conditions, we need to better understand the policies and strategies that shape the programmes and other interventions.

Historical perspective from the YouthPOL database (accessible from 1997 to 2017)

By June 2017 (when we last could access YouthPOL), a total of 485 policy documents were available in the database, corresponding to 65 countries.¹³ Those policy documents were summarised in a comparable data set that we saved and found invaluable for this contemporary analysis. Despite small country coverage, the large policy documentation coverage now allows a closer look at youth employment policymaking and, more importantly, its evolution over time.¹⁴

This database contains information on youth labour market challenges addressed by the policy documents that indicate context-specific priorities (figure 2). The challenge that the largest portion of policy documents across all regions targeted was the relevance and quality of technical and vocational education and training, cited in 61 per cent of all documents. Moreover, this was the first priority in all regions, although with different intensities. In Africa and Asia, the share of policy documents mentioning relevance and quality of skills as a challenge exceeded 70 per cent of the total, while in Europe it was 52 per cent and in the Americas 58 per cent.

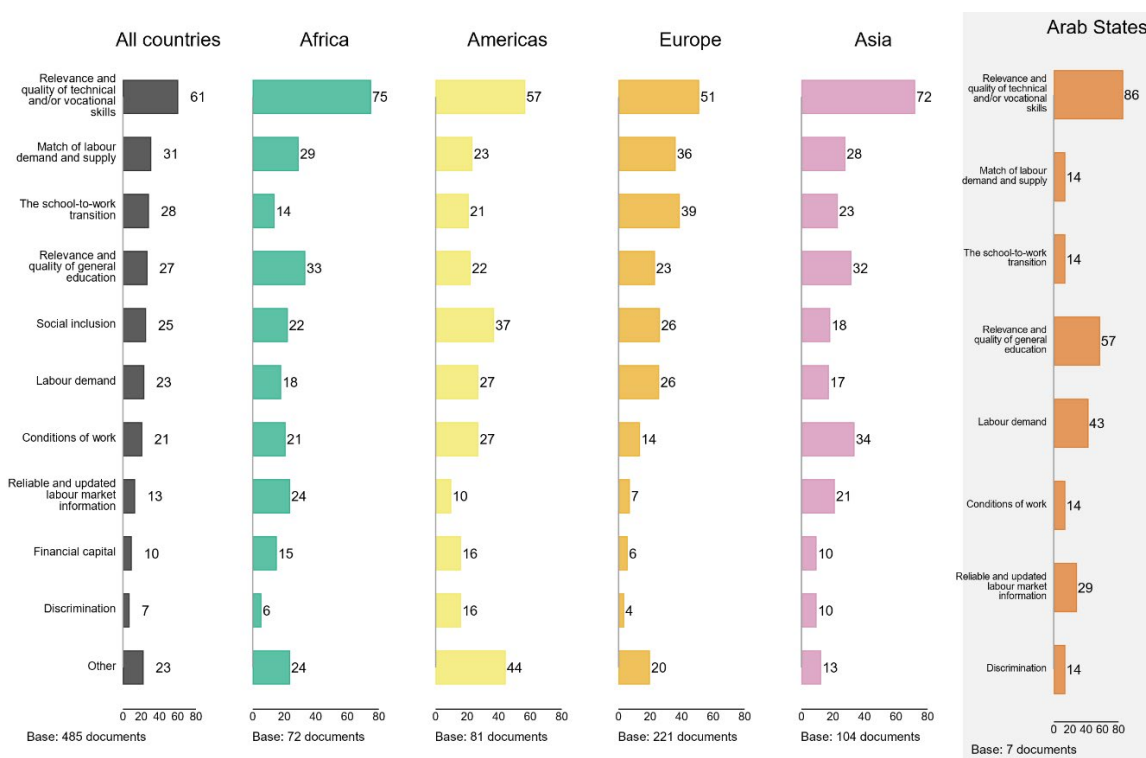
The second global priority, though not the same in all regions, was the match between labour demand and supply. In Africa, the second priority was the relevance and quality of general education; in Asia it was conditions of work for youth; and in the Americas it was social inclusion.

¹² See YouthPOL database.

¹³ Of them, 11 are from Africa, 19 from the Americas, 22 from Europe, 1 from the Arab States and 12 from Asia. See the annex for a more detailed description of this database.

¹⁴ A pioneer study using this data set is the subject of Divald 2015.

► **Figure 2. Main employment challenges related to youth that the policy or law addresses, by region (percentage of YouthPOL documents)**



Note: This question accepted multiple responses. Percentages may sum more than 100 per cent. The percentage of responses were calculated across all countries and within each region. The bars within the regional panels are ordered according to percentage of responses across all countries. The Arab States are plotted separately due to some categories with missing values.

Source: YouthPOL database, accessed June 2017.

Regarding policy areas, the document distribution across the six main areas appeared very different (table 2). Education and training was, again, the most common policy area covered by the documents (four in five documents, or 392 documents out of the 485 total, contained provisions in this area), followed by labour market policies (239 of 485). Macroeconomic and sectoral policies was the least frequent (45 documents).

Interestingly, YouthPOL includes information on policy sub-areas. Within the education and training policy area, technical vocational education and training was the sub-area most frequently mentioned (68 per cent of documents), with important regional variations. In Europe, career education and career guidance along with other work experiences emerged as the second and third sub-areas, but in the Americas, provisions in the sub-area of scholarships and other incentives appeared in 42 per cent of all policies included in YouthPOL. Asian countries included lifelong learning in 52 per cent of documents addressing technical vocational education and training.

Within the area of labour market policy, a large majority of documents (76 per cent) included explicit strategies for active labour market policies (ALMPs) for youth. The second and third most frequent policy sub-areas were income and social protection (21 per cent of documents) and wage policy (19 per cent of documents). Within the ALMPs, the most visible sub-area was the use of public employment services (38 of documents on labour market policy), followed by labour market training for the unemployed and youth guarantees (18 per cent and 15 per cent, respectively). The relatively high frequency of youth guarantee schemes in the data set was influenced by the geographic representation, in which European countries featured relatively prominently.

A third of the highly disperse strategies were grouped under the umbrella term others, among which provisions for labour market information systems stood out.

Enterprise development was covered in 173 policy documents (36 per cent). More than half of these documents reflected a broad coverage of sub-areas, such as access to non-financial services (58 per cent), access to finance (54 per cent), measures for enterprise start-ups (50 per cent) and other self-employment measures for youth (51 per cent). These sub-areas were more represented in the documents from the African countries than from other regions, probably because self-employment is the most dominant employment form in Africa.

Documents that included labour law and legislation as a policy area represented 23 per cent of the total. Contractual arrangements for young people was the most frequent policy sub-area reported in the documents (at 67 per cent), followed by occupational safety and health (at 47 per cent). Anti-discrimination legislation was cited in 26.4 per cent of the documents, while 29.1 per cent of documents had other types of approaches.

► **Table 2. Policy targets in the YouthPOL documents**

	Africa	Americas	Europe	Arab States	Asia	Total
Total policy documents in YouthPOL (number)	72	81	221	7	104	485
Number of countries	11	19	22	1	12	65
Education and training addressed (sub-areas) [n=392 documents]						
Technical and vocational education and training	79.7	81.4	60.1	85.7	62.9	67.7
Career education and career guidance	25.0	20.3	46.4	57.1	36.0	36.7
Other work experience provisions (such as internships and study and work arrangements)	20.3	27.1	42.3	28.6	32.6	33.9
Lifelong learning (such as national qualification frameworks and recognition of prior learning)	26.6	16.9	31.0	42.9	53.9	33.6
Apprenticeships	34.4	30.5	33.3	14.3	29.2	31.8
Scholarships and other incentives, including conditional cash transfers	29.7	42.4	18.5	0.0	42.7	29.2
Remedial education (second chance)	26.6	8.5	20.8	0.0	9.0	16.8
Macroeconomic and sectoral policies (sub-areas) [n=45 documents]						
Sectoral policy	63.6	85.7	75.0	0.0	90.9	77.8
Fiscal policy	45.5	14.3	43.8	0.0	18.2	33.3
Investment policy	36.4	28.6	12.5	0.0	0.0	17.8
Enterprise development addressed [n=173 documents]						
Access to non-financial services	80.6	66.7	51.5	0.0	42.4	58.1
Access to finance	71.0	56.4	44.1	0.0	57.6	54.1
Other self-employment and enterprise development measures for youth	71.0	46.2	39.7	0.0	63.6	51.2
Measures for enterprise start-ups by young people (such as tax rebates and subsidies)	48.4	38.5	55.9	0.0	54.5	50.0

Measures to promote registration and compliance by enterprises in the informal economy	3.2	10.3	4.4	100.0	0.0	5.2
Labour demand addressed [n=103 documents]						
Incentives to recruit young people (such as wage subsidies, tax rebates and waivers)	50.0	64.7	89.7	0.0	77.8	80.2
Other measures to boost labour demand	75.0	35.3	10.3	0.0	27.8	22.8
Incentives to promote the transition of informal young workers to the formal economy	0.0	35.3	8.6	0.0	0.0	10.9
Labour law addressed (sub-areas) [n= 111 documents]						
Contractual arrangements for young people (such as recruitment rules and probation)	80.0	46.4	70.7	100.0	76.0	67.3
Occupational health and safety	60.0	46.4	43.9	0.0	48.0	47.3
Other	13.3	42.9	26.8	0.0	28.0	29.1
Anti-discrimination legislation	26.7	28.6	24.4	0.0	28.0	26.4
Labour market policies (sub-areas) [n=239 documents]						
Active labour market policies for youth (such as public employment services and youth guarantees, private employment agencies, labour market trainings for the unemployed, public works)	92.0	86.7	74.6	100.0	70.7	77.2
Income and social protection (such as unemployment benefits and non-contributory social insurance, social assistance and other income support)	12.0	26.7	19.7	0.0	24.1	20.7
Wage policy (such as minimum wage and youth subminimum wage)	16.0	6.7	13.1	0.0	34.5	17.7
Other policy measures (such as recruitment quotas, positive action)	8.0	20.0	18.9	0.0	15.5	16.9
Collective agreements on youth employment	0.0	0.0	1.6	0.0	1.7	1.3

Source: Authors' own tabulations based on YouthPOL database, accessed June 2017. Values reported in the table are expressed as percentages except where noted.

Documents addressing labour demand policies directly constituted 21 per cent of all policy items in the database. The sub-areas of this policy area followed a common pattern, but some inter-regional differences were detected. The sub-area incentives to recruit young people dominated across all regions (at 80 per cent of documents addressing labour demand). Africa was the only exception, with other measures to boost labour demand leading as the most addressed sub-area. In the Americas, while incentives to recruit youth people also dominated (at 65 per cent), other sub-areas had more relevance than in other regions. These included incentives to promote transition from informal young workers to the formal economy and other measures to boost labour demand.

Macroeconomic and sectoral policies – measures that influence the demand side as well from the product market dimension – were included in 9 per cent of the policy documents. Sectoral policies¹⁵ were the most common (at about 80 per cent) sub-area covered by this type of document, followed by fiscal policies and investment policies (33 per cent and 18 per cent, respectively). The sectoral nature of these policies helps understand the dispersion of agencies in charge of the implementation. The more involved agencies included the ministries responsible for the economy, employment, education and planning and the ministry in charge of youth affairs.

¹⁵ Sectoral policies included supporting the agricultural sector, tourism sector, green sector, etc., such as training young specialists to work in the tourism sector or launching a campaign to attract young people to the agriculture sector via the 4H organizations.

Other implementing government agencies included the ministry of finance, agriculture or trade and commerce.

Information on measures to address informality were present in the enterprise development and labour demand sub-areas. Unfortunately, few documents included these types of measures, meaning that informality was not a main concern when these policy documents were drafted, with little regional variation.

Our analysis of policy combinations revealed several interesting patterns. Overall, 37.2 per cent of the documents addressed one policy area only; when combined with the 27.5 per cent that mentioned two policy areas, a total of 65 per cent addressed two policy areas or fewer (table 3). The ten most frequent combinations of policy areas accounted for 75 per cent (363) of all documents in the database. In the case of one-policy area documents, education and training was by far the most common policy area in the documents (112 of 180, or 62 per cent of all documents). In the case of two-policy area documents, the three most common combinations were education and training as one of the policy areas combined with labour market, enterprise development and labour law and legislation (at 49, 35 and 21 documents, respectively, out of 133).

► **Table 3. Distribution of policy areas cited in the YouthPOL documents (number and percentage)**

Number of policy areas	No. of documents	Percentage
1	180	37.2
2	133	27.5
3	93	19.2
4	52	10.7
5	26	5.4
Total	484	100.0

Note: One case with no policy area reported was excluded from the analysis.

Source: YouthPOL database, accessed June 2017.

The YouthPOL database also includes more details on the particular aspects of the policy documents. For example, 32 per cent of the policy documents were the result of a consultative process (table 4), but 7 per cent were not; and 60 per cent did not include any information on whether a consultative process was undertaken before the formulation of the policy. Among those that included a consultative process, ministries (representing the government), in particular the ministry in charge of employment, emerged as the predominant actors in leading the formulation. Some 25 per cent of the documents cited inclusion of youth associations in the consultation. We found significant dispersion in terms of actors engaged in such consultations across the regions. In Europe, for example, the role of workers' and employers' organizations as well as ministries of employment was prominent.¹⁶ Elsewhere, such as in the Americas, where other ministries (for example the ministry for education and youth) had a more active consultative contribution, the role of the ministries was more pronounced. In Africa, civil society groups had the more dominating role.

¹⁶ Note that in this case, the tripartite employment policymaking process is a precondition for countries to access the European Union (EU).

► **Table 4. Was there a consultative process leading to the formulation of the policy? (percentage of YouthPOL documents)**

	Africa	Americas	Europe	Arab States	Asia	Total
Yes	38	24	68	4	24	158
Other ministries	19	31	68	5	14	137
Ministry in charge of employment and labour	5	9	40	1	2	57
Trade unions	5	3	43	1	4	56
Employers' organizations	5	2	41	1	4	53
International organizations	14	8	7	4	4	37
Youth associations	8	6	15	0	5	34
Universities and academia	3	3	8	2	6	22
Subnational governments	4	3	10	0	2	19
Various stakeholders	9	1	0	1	4	15
Training agencies and institutions	1	3	6	1	1	12
Private sector	5	1	2	0	1	9
Planning departments	1	3	0	0	3	7
Other civil society groups	14	4	7	2	5	32
Other entities	7	6	18	0	6	37
Undetermined	5	4	3	1	1	14
No	0	5	18	0	13	36
Don't know	34	52	135	3	67	291
Total number of documents	72	81	221	7	104	485

Note: The category "other ministries" includes ministries of education, youth affairs, economy, planning and finance, among others. The category "international organizations" includes the UN and its agencies: the ILO, World Bank, among others. Multiple responses were allowed. The sum of the number of entities involved may sum to more than the total number of documents involving a consultative process.

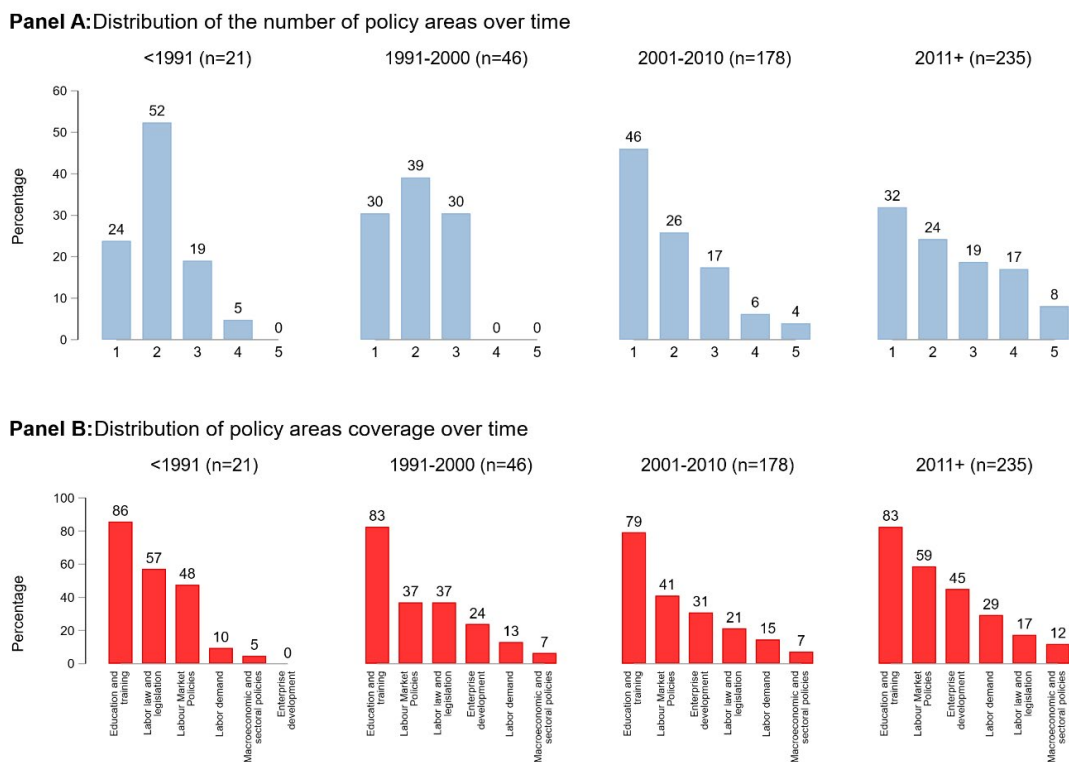
Source: YouthPOL database, accessed June 2017.

The most interesting feature of YouthPOL, however, is the possibility of tracking policy documents over a broad time span. As noted previously, even though about half (235) of the documents were published after 2010, there are older documents, with some dating to before 1990.

Making use of this feature, we concluded that policy documents became more complex – or integrated – over time. For example, the data depicted a progressive diversification of policies that grew to include an increasing number of policy areas. We classified all documents according to the number of policy areas they covered, from one to five (no document covered six policy areas). The average number of policy areas covered by each document was 2.2.¹⁷ However, the average remained stable, at around two policy areas until 2010. By 2015 (the last year of policies in this data set), the mean value grew to 2.5 policy areas per document, with a particular increment in the upper part of the distribution. This means that the share of documents with four or more areas had especially increased over time (figure 2, panel A).

¹⁷ One case with no policy area reported was excluded from the analysis.

► **Figure 3. Evolution of policy areas and number of policy documents (percentage of YouthPOL documents)**

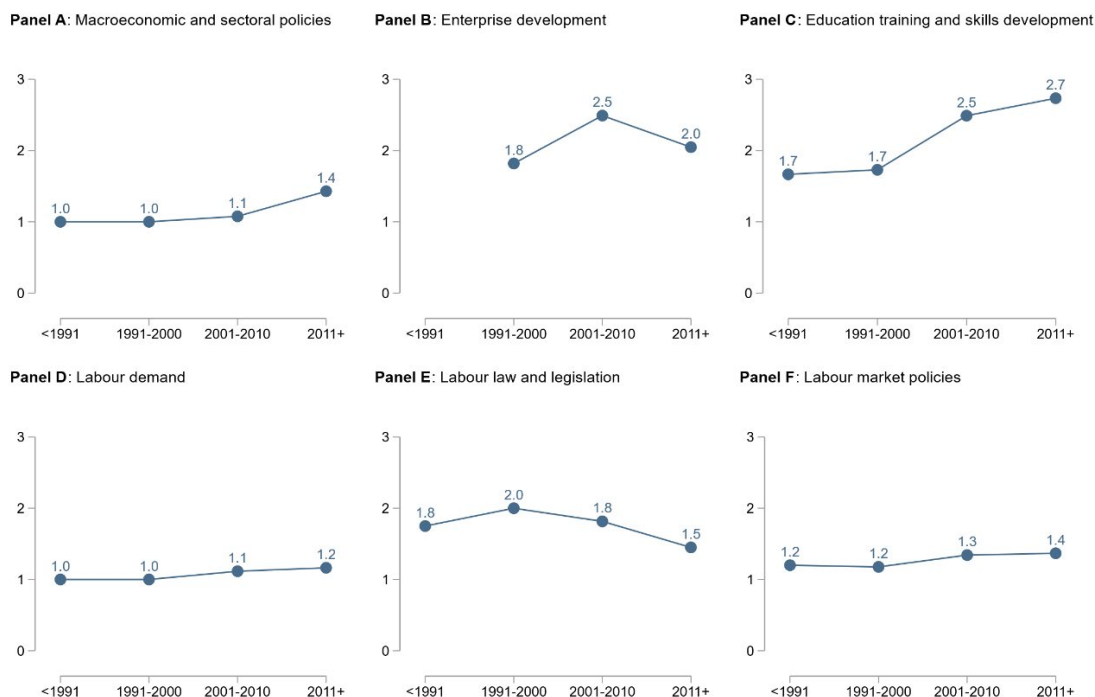


Source: YouthPOL database, accessed June 2017.

The focus of policy documents certainly shifted over time, with the only exception of education and training, which remained fairly stable. Other areas, such as labour market, labour demand and enterprise development, had a sustained increase in the share of policies including them. However, a contrary trend was also observed regarding labour law and legislation, whose presence in the YouthPOL policy documents declined (figure 2, panel B).

Figure 3 expands the analysis by looking at the average number of specific sub-areas reported under each policy area, which can be considered a measure of complexity, but also a broad measure of priority in policymaking. Interestingly, we found a trend towards increased complexity at this level as well. In the case of education and training, the number of sub-areas clearly increased after 1991, from fewer than two policy sub-areas to more than three. Macroeconomic and sectoral policies, labour demand and labour market policies basically remained at around one in the policy sub-areas, with little increase after 2010, especially in the macroeconomic and sectoral policies. Labour law and legislation increased slightly in the 1990s but then decreased as of 2015.

► **Figure 4. Evolution of the number of sub-areas within each policy area, by time period (average number of sub-areas in YouthPOL documents)**



Note: The vertical axis indicates the average number of sub-areas per policy area per document.

Source: YouthPOL database, accessed June 2017.

In the case of enterprise development, we found an important increase in the 1990s and into the 2000s but then a downward trend after 2010. Although this evolution deserves more detailed analysis, it is clear that supporting enterprise development for youth requires multiple interventions, including business development services and financial and non-financial services that can be costly and difficult to sustain, especially if other important policy areas, such as macroeconomic and sectoral policies, do not accompany these interventions.¹⁸ There are, of course, important regional differences in these evolutions.¹⁹

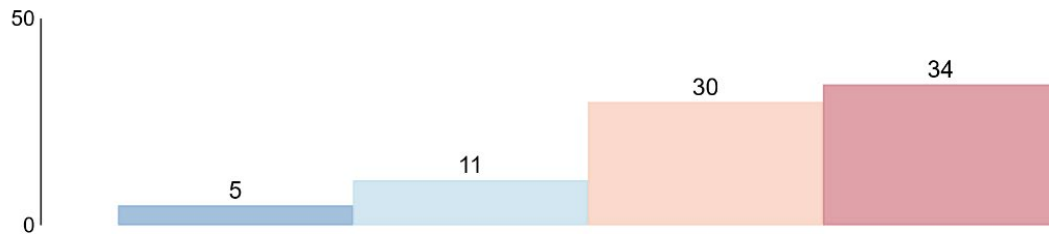
The YouthPOL data set also showed that policies increasingly included budgetary allocations and included quantitative employment targets. Around 39 per cent of the documents that included a budget were relatively more likely to have been produced in the later years of the data set. Among the documents from 2011 to 2015, 34 per cent had a budget assigned. From 2001 to 2010, around 30 per cent of documents featured a budgetary allocation. In contrast, the frequency of budgetary allocation among older documents barely reached 10 per cent. Similarly, the inclusion of a quantitative employment target became more common in the later period. Figure 4 illustrates these trends over time.

¹⁸ Chacaltana (2012) reported the case of Peru, where, in 2012, some 700,000 young persons wanted to open a restaurant, taking advantage of the gastronomic boom in that country. If this were to happen, it would need to be strongly complemented by macroeconomic and sectoral policies, especially private and public investment. Otherwise, the gastronomic market would be negatively affected.

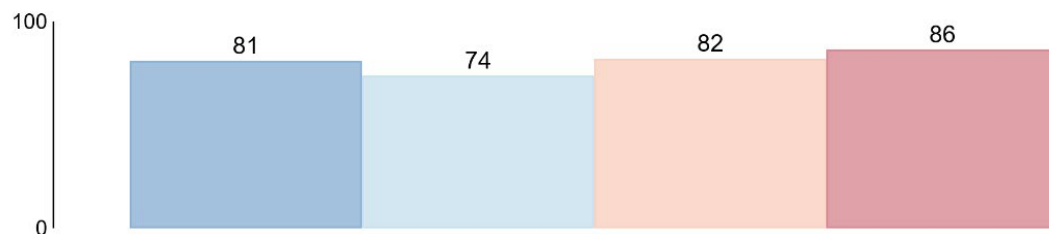
¹⁹ Figure A4 in the annex shows the same graph by geographical regions.

► **Figure 5. Evolution of selected policy document characteristics over time, by period (percentage of YouthPOL documents)**

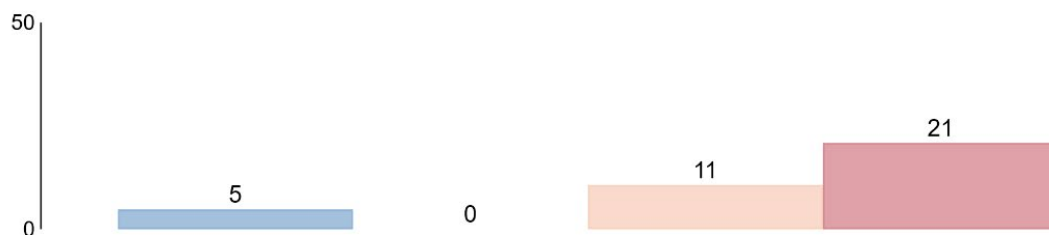
Panel A: Documents include a budgetary allocation



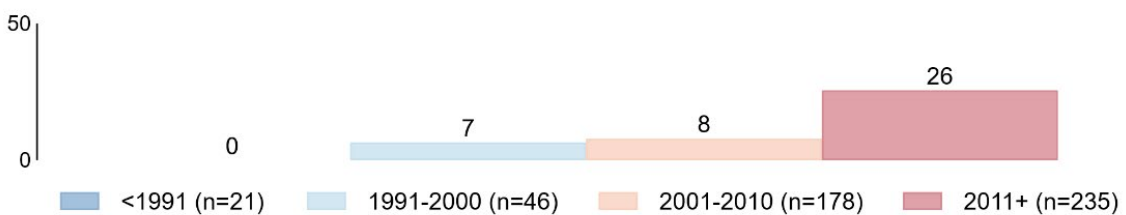
Panel B: Documents include main target groups



Panel C: Documents include overall quantitative employment target



Panel D: Documents include provisions for impact evaluation



Note: The target groups included youth, women, persons with disabilities, vulnerable groups, students, unemployed persons, rural area residents and low-income groups, among others.

Source: YouthPOL database, accessed June 2017.

A concerning issue is the topic of impact evaluation. Only a small proportion of the YouthPOL documents included provision for an impact evaluation. Around one half of the documents in the database did not include any provision: Nearly 40 per cent (192 documents) did not clarify provisions in any way on this, and only 7 per cent of the documents indicated that the policy included such

provision, including the type of evaluation. The majority of them were from European countries. Even though there was an increasing trend on this – after 2011, around 26 per cent of the documents included some provisions for impact evaluation, the proportion was still small and contrasted with the fact that in recent decades there had been tremendous development in impact evaluations and youth-related interventions have been a recurring topic of these evaluations.²⁰ However, most of the evaluations of youth employment interventions found in the YouthPOL documents were carried out on a single treatment setting, and they focused on programmes. The evidence on the impact of policies, including multiple interventions or treatments and their coordination, was scarce.

For policymaking purposes, this type of information on what policy is working and what is not working would allow important questions, such as: Which is the right policy mix in terms of components of policies or strategies? Does a strategy include too much of a policy area in which we do not know much about its impact, thus its effectiveness? Do these strategies include an important share of training and education measures because there is information that they actually work? In some cases, the literature exhibits publication bias – a tendency not to publish negative results, which indicates that an enabling institutional setting is key for impact evaluation and for learning what works and correcting accordingly.

Insights from the Employment Policy Gateway database (active policy documents)

As previously explained, the ILO Youth Employment Programme switched to compiling youth employment policies in a new database in 2021, the Employment Policy Gateway. Using this data set, which refers to currently active policy documents, we can say that policy discussions have broadened, although some topics gained the majority of attention. These include the future of work (ILO 2019a), the role of new technologies (Avila 2021; Pinedo, O'Higgins and Berg 2021), the green transition (Nebuloni and van des Ree 2021) and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, including its long-term consequences on the future trajectories of youth (Chacaltana et al. 2022). In particular since the end of the pandemic, there seems to be increased consensus that youth employment policies require integrated and cooperative policy responses that involve collaboration between different institutions to fully address the evolving challenges that young people face. This includes increased focus on demand-side policies to foster change in policymaking and in labour market outcomes, but instead of asking youths to prepare for the future there is now discussion on how to start building the future for them (Chacaltana and Dasgupta 2021).

Empirical evidence for the most recent policy period is found in the ILO Employment Policy Gateway, a database covering all 187 Member States and their national employment policies and strategies to promote youth employment. This database includes a section on youth employment strategies that, in line with the SDG framework (indicator 8.b.1) and ILO guidelines, defines a national youth employment strategy as “an officially [government] adopted document that articulates a set of measures and provisions aimed at promoting youth employment within a defined time frame”.²¹ It notes that a youth employment strategy can be part of other policy documents, such as a national development policy or a broader youth strategy. The information in this database originates from countries that complete and submit the ILO Survey on National Strategies for Youth Employment, which is administered in the framework of the 2030 Agenda reporting process for SDG indicator 8.b.1.²²

²⁰ The number of impact studies focusing on youth employment programmes has been enough to generate meta-evaluations, also called systematic reviews, or studies used to aggregate findings from a series of evaluations. See, for example, a systematic review of 289 impact studies by Betcherman, Olivas and Dar (2004). See also Kluge et al. 2016 and Eichhorst and Rinne 2016. Kluge (2016) concluded that, although there is no specific combination of services that always works, programmes that add complementary services to the main intervention, regardless of what those are, tend to do better.

²¹ See [ILO Survey on National Strategies for Youth Employment](#) 2019.

²² See [Employment Policy Gateway](#) database, accessed 10 August 2023.

As of 2023, some 130, or 70 per cent, of the 187 ILO Member States had indicated having an active youth employment strategy (as defined in the previous paragraph). By region, that breaks down to 86 per cent of Member States in Europe, 67 per cent in Africa, 66 per cent in the Americas, 61 per cent in Asia and the Pacific and 45 per cent in the Arab States. Of them, some 82 per cent had indicated that the strategy had public funding. By region, this broke down to 87 per cent of Member States in the Americas, 86 per cent in Europe as well as Asia and the Pacific, 75 per cent in Africa and 60 per cent in the Arab States (table 5).

► **Table 5. Countries with a youth employment strategy (percentage of Employment Policy Gateway documents)**

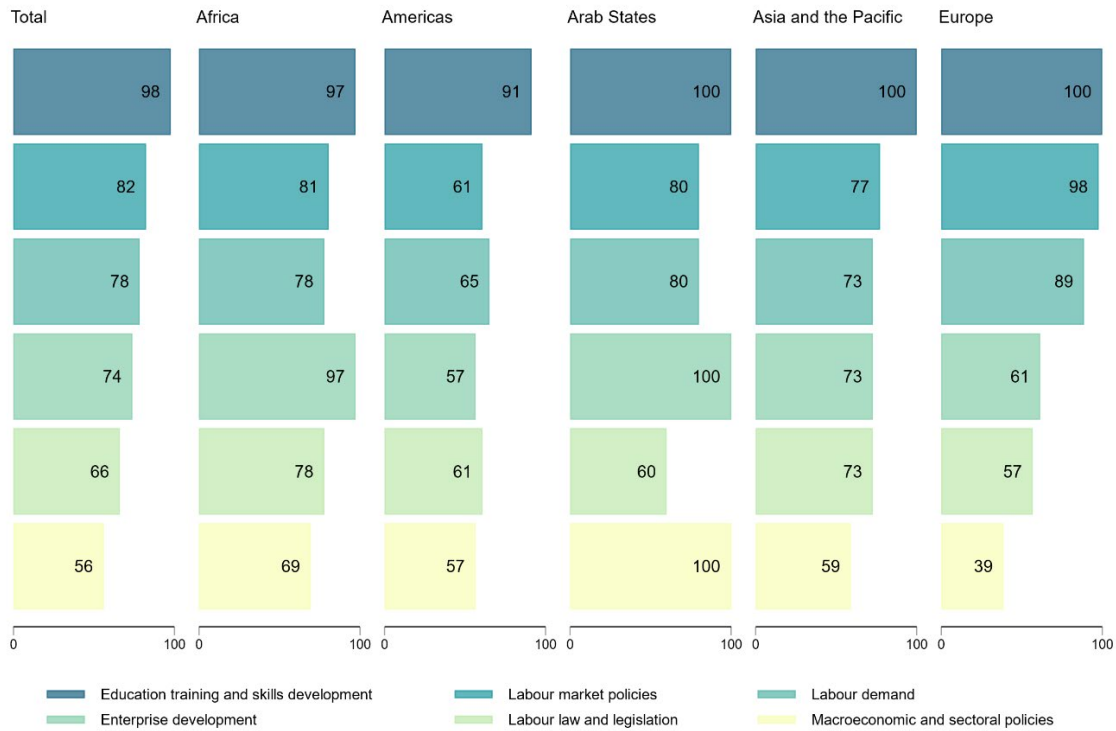
	Countries in the database	Countries with an active youth employment strategy	Among countries with a youth employment strategy, percentage that includes public funding for the strategy	
All countries	187	130	70%	82%
Regions				
Africa	54	36	67%	75%
Americas	35	23	66%	87%
Arab States	11	5	45%	60%
Asia and Pacific	36	22	61%	86%
Europe	51	44	86%	86%

Source: ILO Employment Policy Gateway database, accessed 10 August 2023.

We made the same conclusion as with what was found in YouthPOL – that the most frequent measures included in youth employment strategies were policies and programmes related to education and training. In the Employment Policy Gateway documents, around 98 per cent of the ILO Member States have this type of intervention (all policies are still being applied). The second-most frequent interventions are labour market policies (82 per cent), including for example, public employment services or related measures, while the third-most frequent measures relate to labour demand, at 78 per cent of the youth employment strategies (figure 5). Other countries are also using (or have used) enterprise development (74 per cent of Member States), labour law and legislation (66 per cent of Member States) or macroeconomic and sectoral policies (56 per cent of Member States) to promote youth employment.

Macroeconomic and sectoral policies are also usually considered demand-side policies because labour demand is considered a derived demand from the product market. No details on sub-area policies are available in the data set.

► **Figure 6. Policy areas included in the youth employment strategies, by region (percentage of Employment Policy Gateway documents, calculated among countries with a youth employment strategy)**



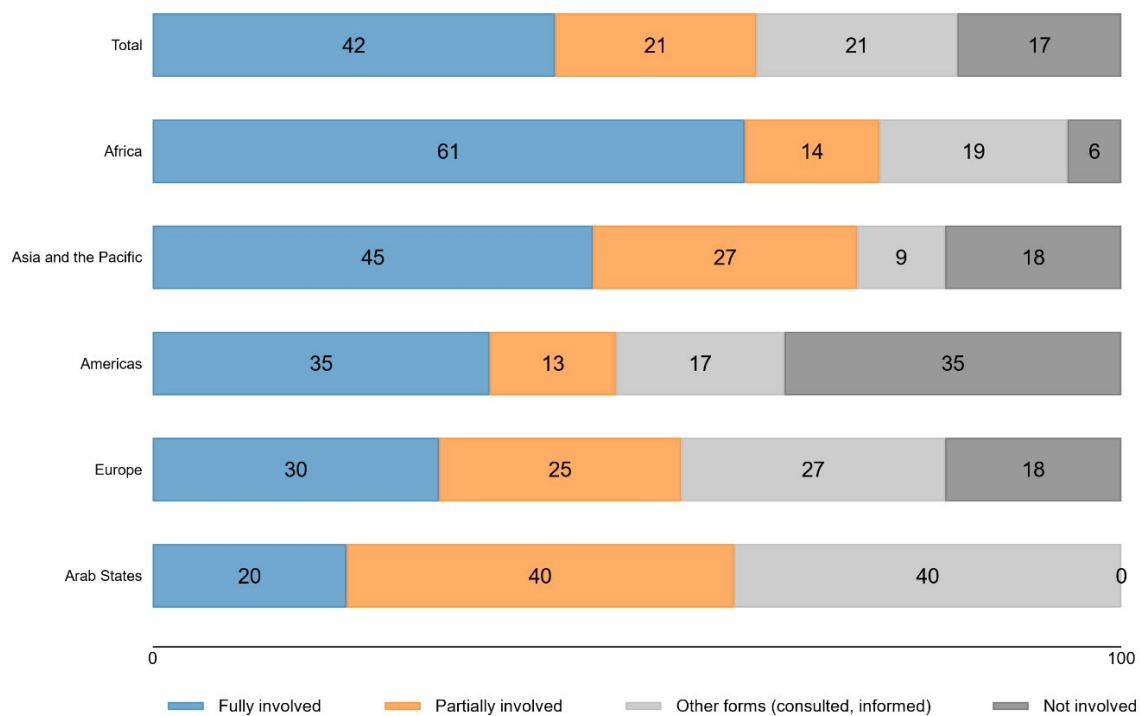
Source: ILO Employment Policy Gateway database, accessed 10 August 2023.

The composition of youth employment strategies varies considerably across regions. In Europe, there is great difference between the three most frequent measures (education and training, labour market policies and labour demand) and the rest in terms of incidence. In Asia and the Pacific, education and training are present in all cases, and the other two measures are used in around 70 per cent of the strategies. Similar to the Americas, where education and training is present in 91 per cent of the strategies, the two other measures are cited in 60 per cent or less of the strategies. In the Arab States, the three most frequent strategies are education and training, enterprise development and macroeconomic policies, while in Africa, the most frequent strategies are education and training and enterprise development, at 97 per cent in both cases.

The ILO Employment Policy Gateway also provides information on the process for elaborating the youth employment strategies, in particular, whether the process included youth participation (figure 6). In general, some 42 per cent of the documents indicated that youth were fully involved and 21 per cent indicated that youth were partially involved (only for some elements of the youth employment strategy). Countries in Africa and the Asia-Pacific region reported a high percentage of youth employment strategies involving social partners as well as the highest percentage of youth being fully involved. This means that countries included youth-led organizations, though in different modes and degrees, in their national youth employment policymaking.²³ Incorporating the perspectives of young people into the policymaking process, via social dialogue, can ensure that initiatives are relevant, inclusive and aligned with the needs and aspirations of youths.

²³ Note that the concept of “youth-inclusive social dialogue” has recently gained attention. According to the ILO, it refers to the inclusion of youth in the tripartite social dialogue structure that includes workers’ organizations, employers’ organizations and governments. See Mexi (2023) for more details on the youth-inclusive social dialogue.

▶ **Figure 7. Youth participation in the formulation of a youth employment strategy, by region among 130 countries with a youth employment strategy (percentage among Employment Policy Gateway documents)**



Source: ILO Employment Policy Gateway database, accessed 10 August 2023.

▶ 3 Balance and perspective

The most typical conclusion of many studies on youth employment tends to centre on the difficult situation of young people in the labour markets, as compared to other generations of workers. This seems to be a regularity that will not change by itself. Therefore, the real challenge is how to address this problem in terms of policies. Since labour markets are constantly evolving, youth employment policies need to adapt accordingly. Unfortunately, there is less empirical research in this area. Thus, we concentrate here on the main patterns and trends of the youth employment policies summarised in the ILO Employment Policy Gateway and the YouthPOL policy documentation data sets.

This information allows us to confirm that policies are indeed evolving, although not necessarily at the same pace as labour markets. Although it is difficult to identify exact dates, we can say that in the earlier documents the focus was more on education and training. A second important point in time occurred when active labour market policies (ALPMs) started to increase. As of the mid-2000s, the importance of macroeconomic or business-related policies also increased, although with important regional differences. In other words, youth employment policies seem to evolve into more integrated measures, albeit with great variations across regions and countries. In fact, the most common strategy has only one policy area, and most times that policy area is education and training. Moreover, when there is more than one policy area, in the majority of situations, there are two policy areas, with one of them being education and training. Nonetheless, the trend of integrated measures exists, which means that an increasing number of countries are moving in this direction, a trend that will probably continue into the near future.

Labour markets, however, are evolving even more rapidly. The recent research on the future of work suggests that the current generation of youth are facing remarkably different labour markets in terms of demographic patterns, globalisation, technological advancements and climate change. This is triggering new transitions to and through the world of work. There is ongoing discussion on the need for a new generation of youth employment policies. From our perspective and based on the analysis for this paper, we think the discussion must not only look at *what* to do, but also *how* to do it.

On “what policies”, a priority area would be more emphasis on the *demand side* of the youth labour market, including labour demand and macroeconomic and sectoral policies. A major deficit in the existing youth employment policies is the lack of coherence between the policies that prepare young people for the labour market and the policies that create opportunities for them (Chacaltana and Dasgupta 2021).

Another area that deserves more attention is *quality of jobs*.²⁴ The international agenda largely focuses on youth joblessness (basically youth unemployment and youths not in education, employment nor training (NEET)). However, having a job does not mean that all problems are solved, especially in developing countries. Moreover, when young people find a job, it is frequently characterised by low-productivity and vulnerable conditions. Evidence from several studies indicates that a difficult transition to the labour market can have long-lasting detrimental effect on young people’s employment and personal trajectories later in life (Bell and Blanchflower 2011).

There are other topics, which are more recent and are gaining more attention, such as the *digital transition*. Nevertheless, the current discussion on new technologies mainly focuses on how new technologies are transforming the production processes and labour markets. Less attention is

²⁴ Our review found a decreasing trend on interventions related to law and institutions and very low incidence of provisions related to formality and informality. Some studies even consider that “legislation is failing the youth” (Vega 2022).

given to the way new technologies are affecting policymaking, in particular youth employment policies. It is most likely that youth employment policies in the future will be relatively similar to what we have today (training, employment services, etc.), but will operate very differently because of new technologies.

Another important topic is the *green transition*. In many countries, the green economy holds largely unexploited job creation potential, including for young women and men. However, greening the economy does not automatically translate into decent jobs for youths, and dedicated initiatives are required, either taking a full-fledged green jobs promotion approach (“green only”) or enhancing the integration of green jobs within institutions and programmes (“green blending”) (Nebuloni and van der Ree 2022). Another policy area relates to *non-labour dimensions*. Young people are more than individuals active or inactive in the labour market. They are persons trying to build a future for themselves and their family. The 2030 Agenda institutionalises this holistic approach by adopting SDG targets from different dimensions of the lives of young people, covering both work and non-work aspects.

“The how” in the new generation of policy discussion deserves significant more attention than ever. However, it should be a multilayered “how” discussion: How should we think about youth employment and the future? How should we prepare both? How can a policy (or strategy) get everyone to that place? Afterwards, these questions and solutions should be examined to determine if they were indeed the appropriate questions and solutions. This latter “how” should be led by the following question: How do we check ourselves (check that we made a good decision on policy direction) and how have we held this policy to account?

Although some national programmes or interventions are experimenting with multiple interventions, including new topics, this also opens the possibility that programmes providing multiple services could dilute their impact or even overlap with each other. Future discussions need to relate more to the coordination mechanisms – including digital interoperability - of multiple interventions and for that, strengthening the institutional dimension (who does what, with how many resources, the coordination mechanisms, etc.) is key. Governments could also discuss possible complementarities: between interventions, such as what is the right policy mix for each case?

In the policy documentation of two decades, we observed an encouraging evolution for this paper’s analysis – although more work is needed – on the inclusion of budgets in policy design and increased provisions for impact evaluations, albeit at still a low level. Youth employment has been a recurring topic for impact evaluations. However, they have mostly focused on programmes (one intervention) rather than on policies (multiple interventions and their coordination). The current imperative is to evaluate one step further back to ensure we had the right policy to start with.

Increasingly, policy documents include consultations with social partners. In recent years, political will has increased for the strengthening of a youth-inclusive social dialogue for the development and implementation of employment and labour market policies that target youth. In 2022, an international high-level tripartite meeting on social dialogue with and for youth that included participation from labour ministers, workers’ and employers’ organizations as well as youth organizations concluded that a fourth constituency should not be created, but that young people should (through different programmes and actions) be included in the ranks of workers, employers and governments. Such an approach would guarantee sustainability. In addition to strengthening youths’ participation in the tripartite structure of social dialogue, consultations with youth groups can develop knowledge on the situation of youths.

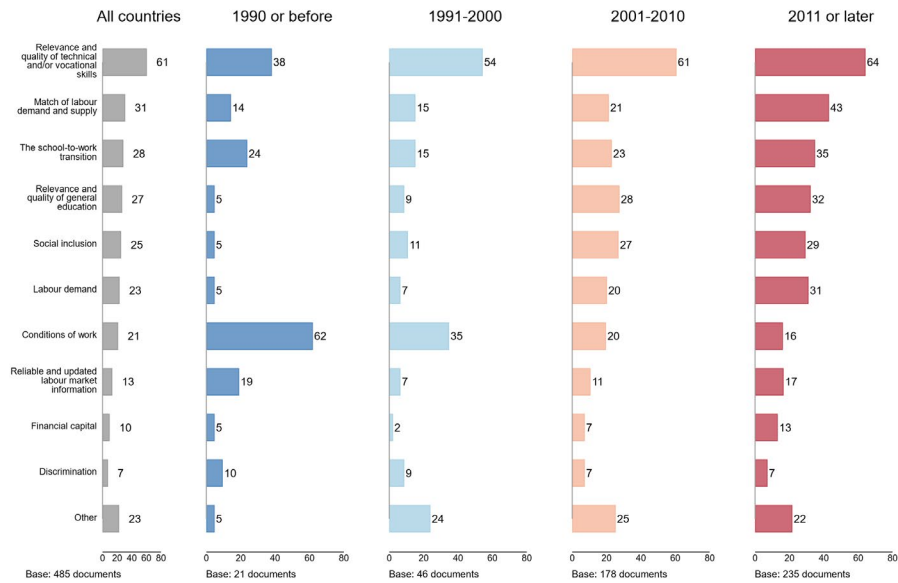
Annex

► **Table A1. Distribution of documents in the YouthPOL database, by region (percentage except where noted)**

	Region					Total
	Africa	Americas	Europe	Arab States	Asia	
Total policy documents in YouthPOL (number)	72	81	221	7	104	485
Number of countries	11	19	22	1	12	65
Nature of the document						
National development strategy/framework	13.9	12.3	3.2	14.3	8.7	7.6
Legislative framework (laws, decrees, regulations, etc.)	40.3	50.6	47.5	14.3	45.2	46.0
National education, skills development policy and strategy	12.5	4.9	10.0	14.3	15.4	10.7
Youth development policy	6.9	6.2	7.2	0.0	10.6	7.6
Other	9.7	9.9	5.9	28.6	9.6	8.2
National action plan on youth employment	2.8	1.2	4.1	0.0	1.0	2.7
Employment policy or strategy	8.3	1.2	2.7	14.3	4.8	3.9
National action plan (on education, employment, etc.)	1.4	4.9	9.1	0.0	2.9	5.8
National employment plan	0.0	0.0	3.6	0.0	1.0	1.9
Poverty reduction strategy	1.4	1.2	1.4	14.3	0.0	1.2
Youth employment policy or strategy	2.8	7.4	5.4	0.0	1.0	4.3
Is youth employment covered within the document?						
Yes, youth are mentioned in some of the policy areas	58.7	53.6	62.3	71.4	73.6	63
No specific mention but there is an implicit coverage	36.5	14.5	15.8	28.6	19.8	19.9
Yes, the document is only on youth	4.8	31.9	21.9	0	6.6	17.2
Total	100	100	100	100	100	100

Source: YouthPOL database, accessed June 2017.

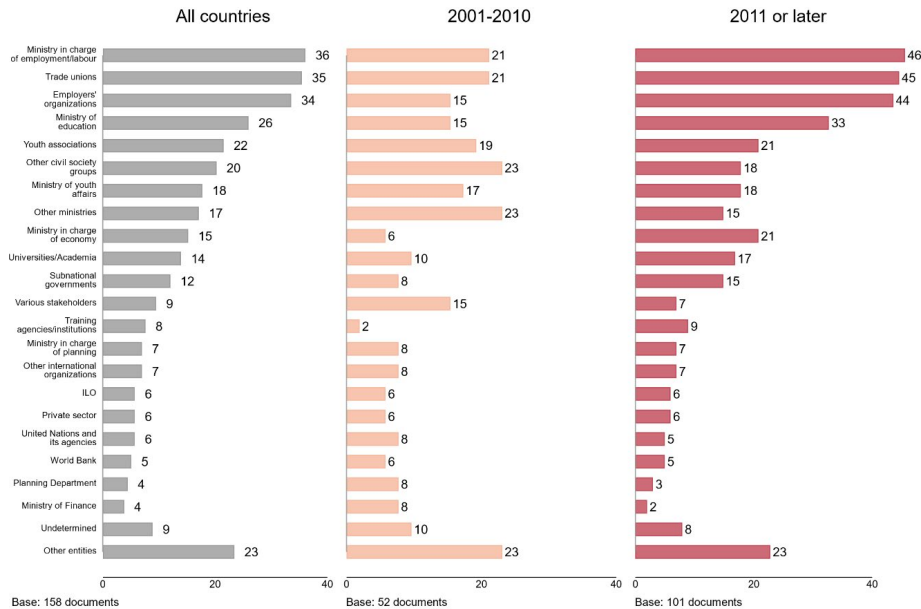
► **Figure A1. Main employment challenges related to youth that the policy or law addresses, by time period, (percentage of YouthPOL documents)**



Note: This question accepted multiple responses, and the percentages may sum to more than 100 per cent. The percentage of responses was calculated across all countries and within each period. The bars within the period panels are ordered according to percentage of responses across all countries.

Source: YouthPOL database, accessed June 2017.

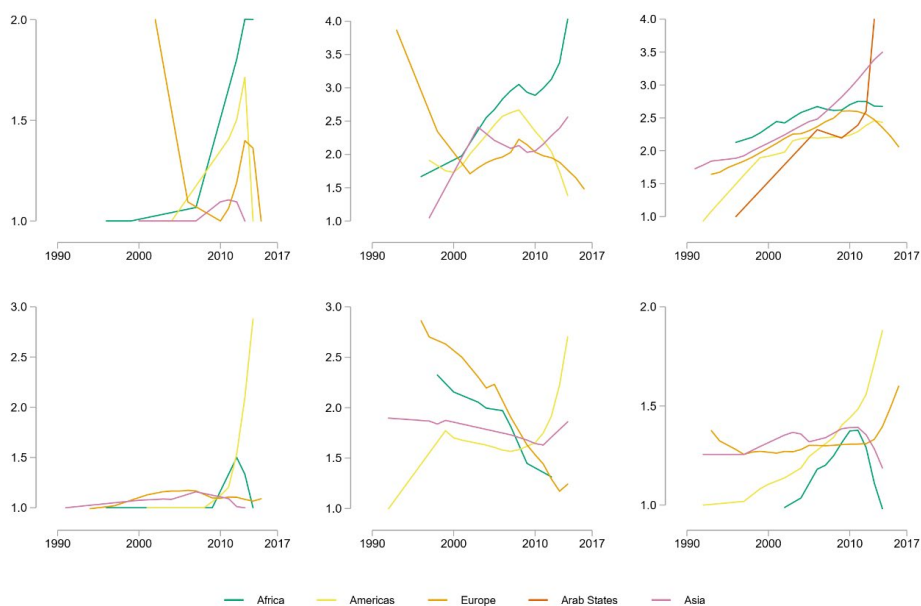
► **Figure A2. Entities involved in the process leading to the formulation of the policy, by time period (percentage of YouthPOL documents)**



Note: Estimates are based on documents that included a consultative process. Nine documents issued in 2000 or before were excluded. Multiple responses were allowed. Percentages may sum to more than 100 per cent. The percentage of responses was calculated across all countries and within each period. The bars within period panels are ordered according to percentage of responses across all countries.

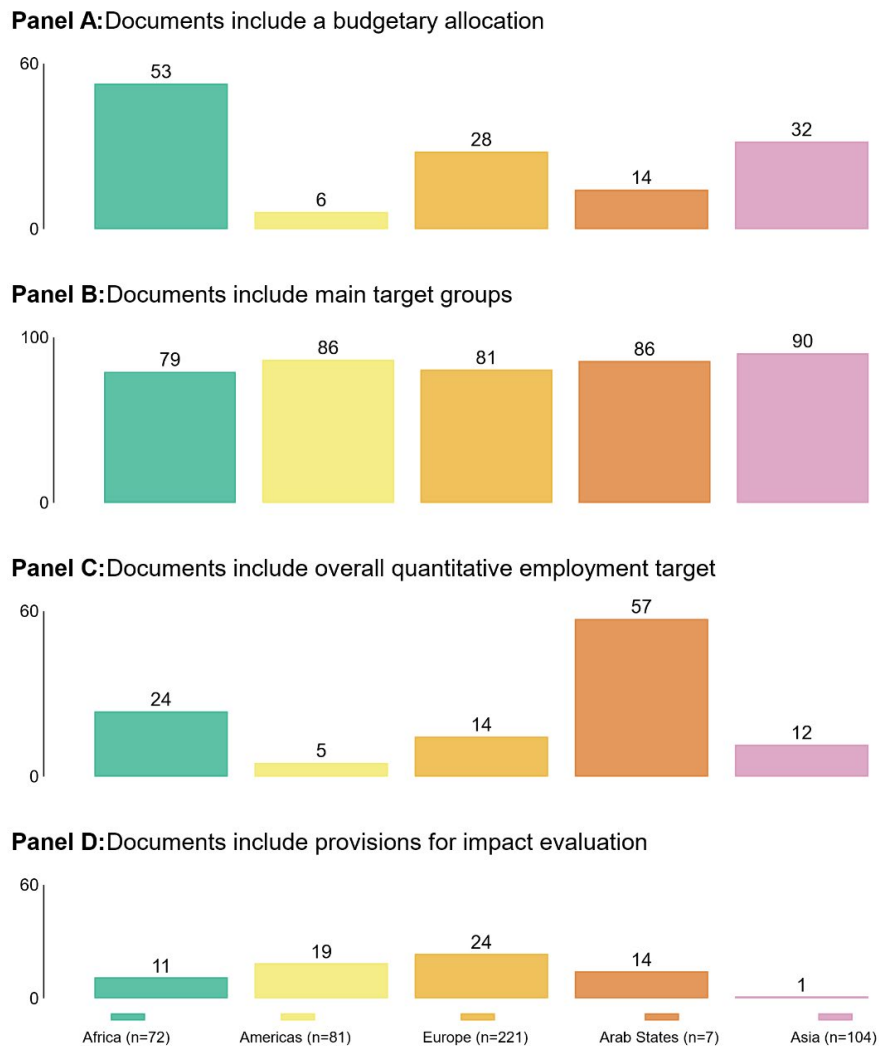
Source: YouthPOL database, accessed June 2017.

► **Figure A3. Evolution of the number of sub-areas within each policy area, by period of time and region within YouthPOL documents (smoothed average number of sub-areas)**



Note: The vertical axis indicates the average number of sub-areas per policy area per document. Lines are smoothed using locally weighted regressions. The horizontal and vertical axes are free scales.

Source: YouthPOL database, accessed June 2017.

► **Figure A4. Selected policy document characteristics, by region (percentage of YouthPOL documents)**

Note: The target groups include youths, women, persons with disabilities, vulnerable groups, students, unemployed persons, residents of rural areas, low-income persons, among others.

Source: YouthPOL database, accessed June 2017.

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Acknowledgements

We received helpful comments from Sangheon Lee, Barbara Perrot, Maria Prieto, Eleonor D'Achon, Sara Elder, Marcelo Cuautle, Evelyn Vezza and Johannes Weiss. All remaining errors are ours.

► Advancing social justice, promoting decent work

The International Labour Organization is the United Nations agency for the world of work. We bring together governments, employers and workers to improve the working lives of all people, driving a human-centred approach to the future of work through employment creation, rights at work, social protection and social dialogue.

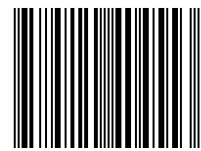
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ISBN 9789220404553



9 789220 404553