

Set up to succeed: Training to access decent work in West Africa

Good jobs don't come easy in Togo and Burkina Faso. Given the right support, counsellors could guide young entrepreneurs on to a brighter career path.

Some encounters can transform a life.

For a young person just beginning to make their way into the world, sound advice from a counselor could be one of these pivotal moments.

Dozens of dedicated career counsellors bounce from classrooms to offices across Burkina Faso and Togo, guiding students and job seekers on how to shape their professional opportunities.

These professionals have their work cut out for them. The young people they advise make up some sobering statistics. It takes 35 months, on average, for higher education graduates in Togo to get their first job – and more often than not, they secure it through personal connections. By some estimates, 63% of Togolese work in the informal market, where working conditions tend to be poor. And a large chunk of the country's population has been unemployed in recent years, including those who are highly educated.

For many young people in West Africa who face uninspiring job prospects, the only opportunity for decent work – or any work at all – is to create it themselves. More and more students and job seekers are considering taking matters into their own hands, encouraged by stories of successful entrepreneurs.

Yet, the professionals called on to answer that need often lack the right tools. According to Kokou Atitsogbe, a researcher at the University of Lausanne in Switzerland, providing psychological-based counselling can help young entrepreneurs make better decisions. “They [career counsellors] don’t have such kind of training,” he says.

Atitsogbe is involved in a series of initiatives aiming to fill this gap, through a project that brings together the Univer-

sity of Lausanne with the University of Lomé in Togo, and two universities in Burkina Faso – Joseph Ki-Zerbo and Norbert Zongo. The goal is to equip counselors with tools to guide the next generation of Togolese and Burkinabé workers onto a more rewarding career path.

“Being able to train young people to become entrepreneurs will allow them to employ themselves and to access decent work,” says Abdoulaye Ouedraogo, a lecturer at the University Joseph Ki-Zerbo of Ougadougou in Burkina Faso, who is involved in this work.

The right tools for the job

“What is usually done now”, explains Atitsogbe, “is that people import tools developed in Western countries. And we are trying to promote a new approach.”

Mainstream psychological assessments and other career counselling resources that emerge from research in Western countries often miss the mark when they cross borders.

“Training young people to become entrepreneurs will allow them to access decent work.”

Abdoulaye Ouedraogo,
University Joseph Ki-Zerbo

Circumstances differ between countries. What stops a young person from accessing employment – the number of job opportunities, or how easy it is to access training – varies tremendously between Switzerland and Togo.

Existing tools may not capture the reality at each location, for instance by referring to professions that simply do not exist while ignoring job opportunities that make for thriving careers. This

gap is more striking for materials meant to help young people launch their own businesses. Even how counsellors work, from engaging in one-to-one conversations in the West to facing whole classrooms in West Africa, means that the resources and how they can be used need to be re-thought.

Atitsogbe and his colleagues are now developing and validating guidance tools that are locally appropriate. The work is part of a project which launched in 2018 with funding from the r4d research programme, a joint initiative by the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation and the Swiss National Science Foundation. Overall, the research aims to better understand and improve educational guidance to strengthen access to decent work in West Africa.

In this latest phase, it focuses on equipping counsellors to help young people access and create decent work for themselves, with a focus on entrepreneurship. The work is spearheaded by Atitsogbe and Ouedraogo with Jérôme Rossier, professor of career counselling at the University of Lausanne, alongside Issa Moumoula from University Norbert Zongo in Burkina Faso and Paboussoum Pari from the University of Lomé in Togo.

The team has already found that career and school counsellors could act as catalysts in the effort to cut down unemployment and promote decent work. It also probed the definition of ‘decent work’ – since 2015 an explicit goal in the UN’s 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development – to pinpoint what it means to people in Sub-Saharan countries



A young woman working as a sales agent in a car parts store at Koudougou, Burkina Faso. © Dr. Saïba Bakouan



“We are trying to promote a new approach”

Kokou Atitsogbe, University of Lausanne

such as Togo and Burkina Faso: work that puts food on the table and children in schools, work that preserves dignity and integrity, work that is ‘blessed by God’.

The tools are designed and validated using information collected directly from career counselling services in the two countries. This ‘bottom-up’ methodology means what gets developed is grounded in the local context. “This is a major factor of success”, says Atitsogbe.

Training agents of change

The next step is to deploy the tools, and ensure working counsellors are equipped to use them – whether that’s a leaflet designed to help students choose among career options, or an assessment of the barriers they face when making the transition from university to the job market.

Most school and career counsellors working in Burkina Faso and Togo will be given an opportunity to get familiar with the new tools through a training workshop, to be offered at the University of Lomé in January 2022. “The idea would be to have this training developed by the local partners, for local practitioners,” says Rossier.

The team is navigating some logistical challenges along the way. “When you organise training, you have to think of the distance all these counsellors might have to cover to attend”, explains Ouedraogo.

Those who attend will emerge from the training not only equipped to use the resources, but also to disseminate their knowledge to colleagues, ex-

panding the reach of the programme into rural areas in particular. And career counsellors may only be the first step. “We will also, maybe, invite people who are active in employment offices; and people active in associations or institutions, who also offer help in this domain”, explains Rossier.

Alongside this effort, the team is collating information about entrepreneurship training in Burkina Faso and Togo, to be made available online. According to Ouedraogo, this is for “all people who might be interested to develop entrepreneurship to have a clear understanding of what is available”. Anyone keen to start their business will be able to tap the information platform for details about entrepreneurship programmes in their country, what they cover, and how they can be accessed. Career counsellors will also have access to resources such as training videos.

Ripple effects

The team knows full well that when it comes to making real change, the dedication and willingness of professionals on the ground can only go so far. “The first step was to explain the project at the university level, to people in charge”, recalls Ouedraogo.

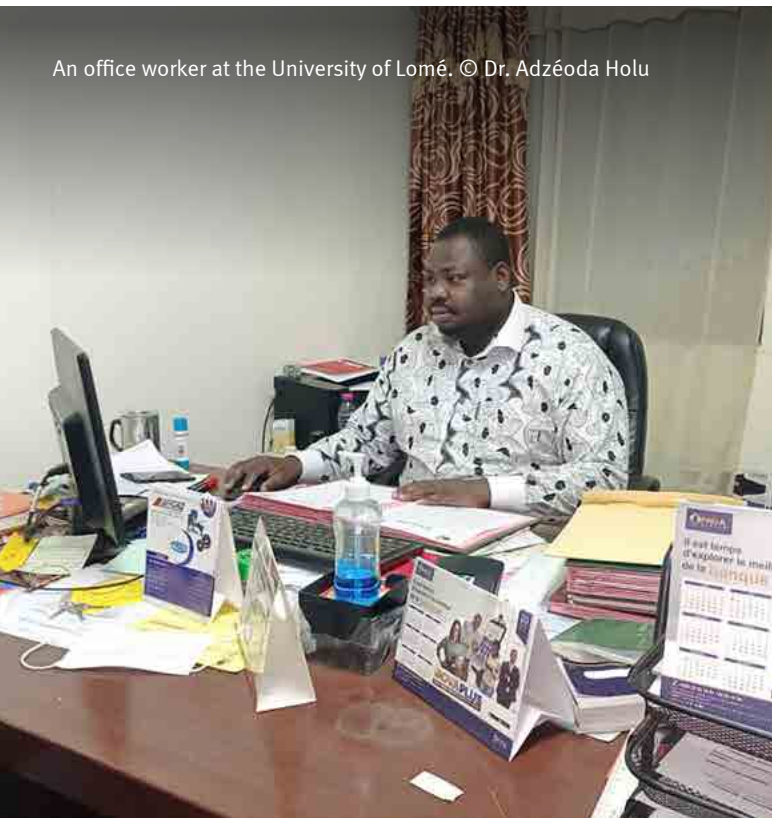
“The idea would be to have this training developed by the local partners, for local practitioners.”

Jérôme Rossier, University of Lausanne

They also look to networks beyond the university, through contact with ministries that deal with entrepreneurship, youth and career guidance. The hope is to influence policymaking by keeping government officials briefed about progress on the project’s research, tools and training.

“When we spoke with several of these policymakers, they were quite con-

An office worker at the University of Lomé. © Dr. Adzéoda Holu



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vinced about [our] ideas and intentions,” says Rossier. “But if they will use them in the long run? It’s a bit difficult to know”.

As things stand, there are positive signs in West Africa and beyond. “Some countries are making policies, for example, to help young people to become their own employers [self-employed],” says Atitsogbe. Governments and international institutions are increasingly keen to back entrepreneurship as the way to cut unemployment.

Practical career-counseling tools aside, the project also feeds into a broader exploration of how the average person in Burkina Faso or Togo might perceive their relationship with decent work. The team says that according to Psychology of Working Theory, which hasn’t been tested in Sub-Saharan Africa until now, it’s important to develop a young person’s psychological resources, such as a sense of agency and freedom over their career decisions regardless of the circumstances around them. “If they develop those psychological resources, they could increase the chance to access decent work,” explains Atitsogbe. “And according to the model, if people access decent work, they will have wellbeing, and work fulfillment.”

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