

**YouMatch**

Global Initiative on Innovative  
Employment Services for Youth

# How should PES be strengthened to effectively contribute to labour market resilience in the face of COVID-19?

An account of priorities set by members of the YouMatch network in Africa and the Middle East



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# Acronyms and abbreviations

AU	African Union
ANPE	National Employment Agency of Benin
GIZ	Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GmbH)
ICT	Information and Communications Technology
ILO	International Labour Organization
LMI(S)	Labour Market Information (System)
MENA	Middle East and North Africa
NEET	Not in Education, Employment, or Training
NGO	Non-governmental organisation
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
PES	Public Employment Service
PrEA	Private Employment Agency
SamPES	Self-assessment method for Public Employment Services
TVET	Technical and Vocational Education and Training
UfM	Union for the Mediterranean
WAPES	World Association of Public Employment Services

# Abstract

Because of their role in helping firms and workers adjust to changing labour markets and coping with the related challenges, PES have a key role to play in crisis mitigation and recovery. Therefore, policy makers ought to pay special attention to PES to meet the challenges brought about by the pandemic. This paper summarizes the learnings of the YouMatch network in Africa and the Middle East on how to best cope with the COVID-19 crisis and some of the necessary steps to be taken for the PES to become strong players in recovery. It is based on the findings of a series of virtual workshops and bilateral exchanges that were held between June and November 2020 with a selection of PES practitioners on the ground from some of the member countries. It is an attempt to summarize the most burning issues that should be considered in future policy-making processes. It does not provide an exhaustive analysis of all challenges PES face during the pandemic, nor does it intend to offer a comprehensive list of solutions to the crisis.

Concretely, the paper suggests that PES address three core issues to better cope with the COVID-19 crisis and become drivers of a human-centred recovery in line with the respective ILO Resolution adopted in June 2021:

- i) enhancing efficiency and effectiveness through a review of PES strategies;
- ii) ensuring labour market inclusiveness through better support for vulnerable groups; and
- iii) strengthening resilience of labour markets by better reacting to labour market needs.

Digitalisation and multi-stakeholder approaches are identified as two major cross-cutting themes that are essential for PES' success in delivering efficient and effective employment services also in times of crisis.

The Global Initiative on Innovative Employment Services for Youth – YouMatch – implemented by the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit GmbH for the German Federal Ministry of Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) between 2016–2021 improved employment services through an interregional dialogue between practitioners. The YouMatch network consists of around 100 practitioners from public and private employment services, civil society organizations, education institutions and other key actors from 25 countries in Africa and the MENA region. In needs-based, interregional thematic Communities of Practice (CoPs)<sup>1</sup> they exchanged on experiences, technical solutions, lessons learned, best practices, and innovative approaches to promote youth employment.

<sup>1</sup> Topics addressed in the YouMatch CoPs are career guidance and soft skills, setting up effective job centres, labour market information systems, public-private partnerships and multi-stakeholder approaches and employment services for rural youth.

# How should PES be strengthened to effectively contribute to labour market resilience in the face of COVID-19?

## An account of priorities set by members of the YouMatch network in Africa and the Middle East

**Employment Services (ES)** in general are meant to promote an efficient development, integration and use of the labour force. Public Employment Services (PES) are – as government institutions – major actors for implementing national and regional employment and labour market policies. The PES' basic mandate is to help firms and workers, particularly young people and vulnerable groups, adjust to changing labour markets and cope with the related challenges. There is increasing collaboration with Private Employment Agencies (PrEAs) and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in this field to do so.

Employment services worldwide face an increasingly complex and fast-changing range of issues in today's **labour markets**: chronic unemployment, underemployment, demographic shifts, digital and technological evolution, New Work (e.g. the rise of platform workers), and effects of climate change or massive structural transformations<sup>2</sup> are some of the major challenges. In Africa and the Middle East labour markets are characterized by very high levels of informal employment and related decent work deficits, gender inequalities, high exposure of young people and women to unemployment – with a high share of youth neither in education, employment or training (NEET) – and a very limited creation of quality jobs.

The ILO<sup>3</sup> estimates that **informal employment** in Africa accounts for 85.8 per cent of all employment (71.9 per cent excluding agriculture) compared to an estimated world average of around 60 per cent. This means that roughly 70 per cent of employees in Northern Africa and almost 90 per cent in Sub-Saharan Africa are either employed in

the informal sector (in unregistered companies, which provide three quarters of informal jobs) or informally employed in the formal sector or in private households. According to the ILO<sup>4</sup>, young people, older persons, less educated individuals, and people living in rural areas are the groups most affected by informality, whereof women are over-proportionally represented in the most vulnerable situations; they often face unstable and very low income, lack of social security and poor working conditions.

**Unemployment and underemployment**, in particular amongst young people and women, and in some cases extremely low (female) labour market participation are widespread and major concerns of policy makers in the region.<sup>5</sup> While unemployment rates are generally high in the region, women are disproportionately affected. In the MENA Region, for instance, ILO estimates<sup>6</sup> show an almost three times higher unemployment rate for adult women than for men (16.2 compared to 5.6 per cent). Young women aged 15–24 years are almost twice as often unemployed than their male counterparts (40.5 compared to 22.8 per cent).

In response to the **COVID-19** pandemic, countries worldwide have adopted drastic measures that severely disrupted economies and labour markets. Lockdowns, travel restrictions and social distancing have slowed down or even totally paralysed many economic sectors, e.g. retail, trade, transportation, accommodation and food services, and manufacturing.<sup>7</sup> Other industries such as energy and utilities, health care, food, ICT, and more, have instead experienced a sharp increase in labour demand.<sup>8</sup> Recent estimates by the ILO<sup>9</sup> show that the effect of COVID-19 on global working

<sup>2</sup> Example: Given the rapid changes brought about by the fourth industrial revolution in South Africa – from artificial intelligence to robotics and machine learning – and the reduced demand for labour in sectors such as mining, the country faced high unemployment and had to invest heavily in programmes to reorient and retrain its workforce, particularly young people, to participate effectively in the 21st century economy.

<sup>3</sup> *Women and men in the informal economy: a statistical picture (third edition)*. International Labour Office, Geneva: ILO 2018

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> See for instance the 4th UfM Ministerial Declaration on Employment and Labour, 2019.

<sup>6</sup> ILOSTAT, ILO modelled estimates, November 2019.

<sup>7</sup> *ILO Monitor: COVID-19 and the world of work. Seventh edition, ILO, 25 January 2021.*

<sup>8</sup> *ILO Policy Brief: COVID-19: Public employment services and labour market policy responses, ILO, August 2020.*

<sup>9</sup> *ILO Monitor: COVID-19 and the world of work. Seventh edition, ILO, 25 January 2021.*

hours has been approximately four times greater than that of the global financial crisis of 2009. In 2020, 8.8 per cent of global working hours were lost relative to the fourth quarter of 2019, equivalent to 255 million full-time jobs. Lower-middle-income countries were most affected, with an average loss of 11.3 per cent and a loss of 29 per cent in the second quarter of 2020. Half of these losses are due to a loss of employment, whereby the shift to inactivity (people withdrawing from the labour market because they are not available to work and/or do not search for a job) by far exceeded the shift to unemployment (people actively searching for new jobs). The relatively lower working-hour losses in low-income countries may reflect the greater importance of informal and agricultural employment and the fact that most people in these countries are involved in subsistence work.<sup>10</sup> Women and especially young workers were particularly hard hit by the crisis in 2020 across all regions and country income groups, whereby the crisis has exacerbated young people's disconnection from the labour market, "highlighting the all too real risk of a lost generation".<sup>11</sup> Also, the magnitude of job losses tended to be much larger for low-skilled workers. Mainly due to the predominant informal sector, the great youth population and gender disparities in African and Middle Eastern countries, the pandemic's overall consequences on the labour market are particularly strong, further aggravating the employment situation and deepening already existing socio-economic disparities.

Because of their role in helping firms and workers adjust to changing labour markets and coping with the related challenges, **PES have a key role to play in crisis mitigation and recovery.** Therefore, policy makers ought to pay special attention to PES to meet the challenges brought about by the pandemic, as a survey by the WAPES<sup>12</sup> suggests. A recommendation note published by the OECD as early as April 2020<sup>13</sup>, lessons learned from the 2008–2009 financial crisis<sup>14</sup>, and the ILO reach similar conclusions, stating that employment services and labour market policies are key in protecting jobs, enterprises and incomes from the fallout of the pandemic, as well as to bridging from immediate measures to a job-rich recovery.<sup>15</sup>

Despite their important role, **PES in the region face many challenges in terms of resources and capacities.** Limited human and financial resources, very basic IT infrastructure, lack of access to labour market information, and often weak cooperation with (and among) other public services, concerned ministries, and the private sector (**more on that under Objective 1**) are cited by YouMatch network members as major challenges and obstacles.

**This paper** summarizes the learnings of the YouMatch network on how to best cope with the COVID-19 crisis and some of the necessary steps to be taken for the PES to become strong players in recovery. It is based on the findings of a series of virtual workshops and bilateral exchanges that were held between June and November 2020. The interviews were held only with a random selection of practitioners, and therefore the paper does not provide for all member countries' perspective on the matter. Additionally to the interviews, it includes recommendations from various YouMatch knowledge products, such as guidelines, toolkits, and evaluations of the project's CoPs, as well as relevant external publications. Furthermore, the paper reflects expert and policy maker feedback on the collected recommendations from key YouMatch steering committee members and partners and has been reviewed and complemented by Mr. Michael Mwasikakata from the International Labour Organization (ILO), and Ms. Eve-Marie Mosseray from the World Association of Public Employment Services (WAPES). The paper therefore aims to propose a subjective account of the most pressing priorities for PES on the ground as perceived by YouMatch practitioners from some of the member countries. It is an attempt to summarize the most burning issues that should be considered in future policy-making processes. It does not provide an exhaustive analysis of all challenges PES face during the pandemic, nor does it intend to offer a comprehensive list of solutions to the crisis. The recommendations are based on practitioners' experiences and needs. Some are very concrete and can be implemented by the PES themselves in a timely manner. Others are indicating directions in which policies and strategies should develop. Therefore, the paper addresses all actors within the African and Middle Eastern employment

10 For more information on informal workers and the COVID-19 crisis see: [ILO Policy Brief: COVID-19 crisis and the informal economy: Immediate responses and policy challenges, ILO May 2020.](#)

11 [ILO Monitor: COVID-19 and the world of work. Seventh edition, ILO, 25 January 2021.](#)

12 [PES s are swinging into Action in Response to the COVID 19 Pandemic. Joint survey by WAPES, ILO, Socieux+, IDB, Editor: Thierry Huort, June 2020.](#)

13 [OECD Policy Responses to Coronavirus \(COVID-19\): Public employment services in the frontline for jobseekers, workers and employers, OECD, 28 April 2020.](#)

14 [Employment and Labour Market Policies in Times of Economic Crisis, published by GIZ, A. Mummert, 2014.](#)

15 [ILO Policy Brief: COVID-19: Public employment services and labour market policy responses, ILO, August 2020.](#)

service ecosystem, but mainly the PES and policy makers at national and particularly also at regional level, i.e., the African Union (AU) and the Union for the Mediterranean (UfM), as well as the international community active in employment issues in Africa and the Middle East.

Concretely, the paper suggests that PES address **three core issues** to better cope with the COVID-19 crisis and become drivers of a human-centred recovery in line with the respective ILO Resolution adopted in June 2021:<sup>16</sup>



**Enhancing efficiency and effectiveness through a review of PES strategies,**



**Ensuring labour market inclusiveness through better support for vulnerable groups, and**



**Strengthening resilience of labour markets by better reacting to labour market needs.**

**Digitalisation** and **multi-stakeholder approaches** are identified as two major cross-cutting themes that are essential for PES' success in delivering efficient and effective employment services also in times of crisis.



## OBJECTIVE 1: ENHANCING EFFICIENCY AND EFFECTIVENESS THROUGH A REVIEW OF PES STRATEGIES

Overcoming political, institutional, and collaboration obstacles

There is a clear need to “strengthen national systems of employment services and national policies to provide quality employment services for workers and employers to mitigate crisis-induced economic and labour market disruption”.<sup>17</sup> In order to manage this global crisis, it is ever more important to have a holistic approach towards employment, meaning implementing employment policies that tackle the demand and supply side of the labour market while improving employment services. PES design and implement labour market policies which are (and should be) part and parcel of the overall employment policy. PES strategy should thus relate to the overall employment goals and objectives of the country. In this sense, PES should be perceived as a central actor and supported at the political level by all relevant stakeholders. Experience from the YouMatch network has shown that PES need immediate and hands-on support in reviewing their strategies to cope with the COVID-19 pandemic and to become the urgently needed agents of change and recovery that they ought to be.

The WAPES' SamPES project (see box, p. 8) could become a cornerstone for strategy review, as it provides a methodology for PES' self-assessment and a network of peers.

### A clear political mandate and coherent frameworks

PES need to obtain a clear mandate from policy makers, as well as sufficient, stable, and targeted financial and human resources to fulfil this mandate, and match labour market demand and supply efficiently and effectively, particularly in times of crisis. It is, however, not the responsibility of PES to obtain a clear mandate, but governments should prioritise PES and provide them with the required mandate to operate effectively.<sup>18/19</sup>

In order to do so, governments should consider putting in place an effective and conducive **regulatory framework** that provides a clear mandate to PES, including sources of financing, and that regulates private providers to ensure a level playing field among them and also protect workers.

<sup>16</sup> [Global call to action for a human-centred recovery from the COVID-19 crisis that is inclusive, sustainable and resilient, ILO Resolution I, International Labour Conference – 109th Session, ILO, 17 June 2021.](#)

<sup>17</sup> [Ibid.](#)

<sup>18</sup> E.g. stressed in the two following studies: i) [Trends and new developments in employment services to support transitions in Sub-Saharan Africa, the Middle East and North Africa Regions, ILO Working Paper 19, ILO, E. Davern, December 2020.](#) ii) [GIZ YouMatch Initiative, Communities of Practice KOMPASS Study, Final Report 23.02.2021. FAKT Consult for Management, Training and Technologies \(Stuttgart, Germany\).](#)

<sup>19</sup> For a brief overview on the legal and policy frameworks in the SSA and MENA regions see: [ILO/YouMatch Guidelines for setting up effective Job Centres in developing countries with reference to sub-Saharan Africa, the Middle East and North Africa Regions. Eamonn Davern and Michael Mwasikakata. Final draft before editing, July 2021.](#)

Given recent trends in contracting out public services to Private Employment Agencies (PrEAs), regulations in line with international labour standards should be developed and implemented, including fundamental principles such as prohibitions on charging fees and costs to workers.<sup>20</sup>

Also, the **institutional framework** for PES seems to play a critical role. A recent study<sup>21</sup>, developed within the YouMatch/ILO cooperation, found that PES organized as executive agencies (independent legal entities) in general tended to be stronger, more effective and efficient than those that were part of ministries. This is confirmed by the OECD.<sup>22</sup> Apparently, such agency-like PES tended to have more focused strategies: “Their dedicated remit to deliver PES services and structured stakeholder input, including from social partners, through tripartite governance systems, may allow for an enhanced priority and facilitate management reforms.”<sup>23</sup> In the countries covered in the study, Benin’s National Employment Agency is considered an agency PES, while all other are either part of the ministry or semi-autonomous bodies (with a legal personality and some financial independence but accountable to the ministry). The institutional framework however strongly depends on the context – as many examples prove it, not all PES should necessarily be organized as executive agencies in order to perform. It is rather important that the institutional framework is strengthened and more autonomy, customised to the PES’s context, is provided to ensure client-based services.

Proper coordination of activities, timely and adequate flow of information and knowledge, e.g. between field offices and the head office, definition of clear targets and the set-up of an effective performance management framework to ensure quality services in the long run, all of these rely on a functioning organizational structure.<sup>24</sup> The OECD<sup>25</sup> found, that in general, institutions with **clear and agile internal structures and processes**, were better equipped to cope with the COVID-19 crisis. Although the challenges of New Work required PES to increasingly shift to such structures

and processes already pre-crisis, it became more pressing for the PES to adapt to ever new realities of the pandemic better and quicker and to ensure fast and comprehensive learning.

### WAPES’ SamPES PROJECT – A PROMISING CORNERSTONE OF PES’ STRATEGY REVIEW

The World Association of Public Employment Services (WAPES) has developed a methodology for **self-assessment of PES (SamPES)** to improve their strategies and develop quality and customer-centered services.

Within the project, the participating PES establish a network of peers and learn what kind of quality assessment for PES exists, how the relevant areas can be assessed by the PES themselves, and how these areas can finally be improved – be it by addressing performance issues in the planning, implementation, monitoring or adjustment phase.

The self-assessment areas are as follows:

- Strategic performance management
- Design of operational processes
- Jobseekers’ services
- Relations with employers
- Evidence-based design and implementation of services
- Management of partnerships
- Allocation of resources

In 2021, WAPES together with YouMatch conducted a pilot project with PES from African and MENA countries to conduct this SamPES method.

The outcomes were action plans, established by the participating PES on their prioritized areas of assessment.

→ <https://wapes.org/en>

20 Mentioned, for instance, in *Global call to action for a human-centred recovery from the COVID-19 crisis that is inclusive, sustainable and resilient*, ILO Resolution I, International Labour Conference – 109<sup>th</sup> Session, ILO, 17 June 2021.

21 *Trends and new developments in employment services to support transitions in Sub-Saharan Africa, the Middle East and North Africa Regions*, ILO Working Paper 19, ILO, E. Davern, December 2020.

22 *OECD Policy Responses to Coronavirus (COVID-19): Scaling up policies that connect people with jobs in the recovery from COVID-19*, OECD, 29 April 2021. In Figure 4. the paper provides a good overview on key features of ALMP systems for agile and effective responses to COVID-19.

23 *Trends and new developments in employment services to support transitions in Sub-Saharan Africa, the Middle East and North Africa Regions*, ILO Working Paper 19, ILO, E. Davern, December 2020.

24 *ILO/YouMatch Guidelines for setting up effective Job Centres in developing countries with reference to sub-Saharan Africa, the Middle East and North Africa Regions*. Eamonn Davern and Michael Mwasikakata. Final draft before editing, July 2021. (More information on performance management can be found in the same paper.)

25 *OECD Policy Responses to Coronavirus (COVID-19): Public employment services in the frontline for jobseekers, workers and employers*. OECD, 28 April 2020.



## A PES digital strategy

At the institutional level, new technologies and digitalisation are key challenges to be addressed. In many of the concerned countries, digital services by PES before the COVID-19 crisis were very limited, e.g. to online job postings, or almost inexistent. The pandemic has clearly accelerated developments in this field. YouMatch network members report the use and development of various digital solutions such as online registration of job seekers, online job portals to manage applications, digitization of job offers and job applications, automatic programming of personalized interviews, automatic upload of company vacancies, and more performed LMIS.<sup>26</sup> However, many services that are still provided offline solely, would need to be transformed into digital or hybrid solutions. New digital services, furthermore, can expand the range of PES' traditional services and therefore need to be incorporated more systematically into the provision of services in order to increase the quality and efficiency of PES services altogether and respond to current challenges. Isolated digital attempts urgently need to be made the norm (e.g. matching services) through clear digital strategies and investment lines.

Yet, in most cases, **digital strategies, dedicated financial resources and flexible processes, sufficient human resources and capacity, digital literacy of both staff and clients, and the relevant IT infrastructure** are still lacking. Accordingly, the YouMatch network members stress exactly these challenges, when naming the factors that limit them in using the full potential of digital tools in times of crisis and beyond. Not surprisingly, the ILO found that countries with a digital offer prior to the pandemic and those with a clear digital transformation strategy, were able to respond more effectively to the crisis-related challenges.<sup>27</sup> In the region, the PES of Benin, Cameroon and Morocco described the most comprehensive systems.<sup>28</sup> They see the development of IT as an agent for transforming their organizations, and are thus not only applying IT to adapt previous analogue processes but developing concepts and strategies for digital services.<sup>29</sup>

While improvements in this field are key for PES to perform efficiently and effectively, the focus in the region should be on a **'realistic' digitalisation**. The main question is therefore how the PES can best perform within a given context. If a country is introducing e-government, for instance, this is an opportunity to also strengthen digital services in the countryside. If even WIFI access is almost inexistent, other means of service delivery must be applied. Isolated sectorial digital strategies should therefore integrate into a broader national digital strategy in order to follow infrastructure investment streams and national priorities. This shows that not only the **institutional commitment** to improve digital strategies and provide digital services is key, but also the **national commitment**, in order to ensure that it is sustainable and that the vulnerable and disadvantaged groups in the labour market are not further excluded. Investments in digital infrastructure are as indispensable as in digital skills.

## A network of partners

Particularly the crisis showed that **collaboration and multi-stakeholder approaches** are essential for PES and should be a corner stone of their post-COVID strategies. Therefore, it is necessary, that the mandate of PES and their relations to other stakeholders in the field of employment services, are clearly regulated in national policy documents.

Given numerous capacity problems and scarcity of resources on side of the PES, **service partnerships and the use of synergies** are considered central. Collaboration with private agencies and non-profit and non-governmental institutions and local actors, can expand coverage and provide additional services to specific target groups (**see also Objective 2**). Important with regards to PrEAs is that they are properly regulated in the national legal framework as stated above, and that there are clear arrangements for the governance of partnerships, so PES don't see them as competitors, which is apparently still a tendency in many countries.<sup>30</sup> Institutionalised collaboration concerning infrastructure and equipment is also considered very helpful

<sup>26</sup> Trends and new developments in employment services to support transitions in Sub-Saharan Africa, the Middle East and North Africa Regions, ILO Working Paper 19, ILO, E. Davern, December 2020.

<sup>27</sup> COVID-19: Public employment services and labour market policy responses, ILO Policy Brief, August 2020.

<sup>28</sup> Trends and new developments in employment services to support transitions in Sub-Saharan Africa, the Middle East and North Africa Regions, ILO Working Paper 19, ILO, E. Davern, December 2020.

<sup>29</sup> The three cases are described in detail in the mentioned study, as well as other country examples with less developed systems.

<sup>30</sup> With regards to establishing Strategic Cooperation Frameworks with private actors see for instance: Trends and new developments in employment services to support transitions in Sub-Saharan Africa, the Middle East and North Africa Regions, ILO Working Paper 19, ILO, E. Davern, December 2020. ILO/YouMatch Guidelines for setting up effective Job Centres in developing countries with reference to sub-Saharan Africa, the Middle East and North Africa Regions. Eamonn Davern and Michael Mwasikakata. Final draft before editing, July 2021. Multi-Stakeholder Dialogue and Cooperation Approaches for Employment Services – Key characteristics and selected case studies from Africa, MENA region and Europe, Prepared by Katja Janischewski with contributions from the YouMatch network, GIZ, April 2021.

by YouMatch network members. In Benin, for instance, the PES could profit from internet labs for job seekers, that were provided during the pandemic by local councils, meeting the requested safety standards. In Kenya, the PES joined forces with partners to make grouped purchases of internet devices to save costs.

In general, the whole **employment ecosystem**, meaning PES, PrEAs, NGOs, ministries, education and (vocational) training institutions, employers and the business sector, social partners, and others, needs to be leveraged to effectively address the challenges around matching labour market demand and supply. Active involvement and representation of the informal sector – both workers and employers – is particularly important in the given contexts, so the PES’ response measures actually reach the concerned actors that usually fear contact with public authorities due to their problematic legal status.<sup>31</sup> In general, experience from the region suggests<sup>32</sup> that PES without a well-developed partner

network are severely limited (in terms of coverage, budget, capacity, and mechanisms). Therefore, enhanced state provision could be introduced as part of a wider enhancement of the PES ecosystem, involving strategic partnerships with actors mentioned above.<sup>33</sup>

Last but not least, **collaboration for peer learning** is considered a key success factor for strengthening PES’ performance. This is the reason why the YouMatch members intensively engaged in cross-regional Communities of Practices (CoPs) on various specific topics during the course of the YouMatch programme.

All forms of multi-stakeholder cooperation deserve special attention, in general but particularly in times of crisis and when it comes to the most vulnerable groups of society. Learnings from the YouMatch initiative even suggest that the needs of vulnerable populations and territories can only be met through a multi-actor approach<sup>34</sup> (for more information see Objective 2).

## CORE ISSUES OF OBJECTIVE 1

### To strengthen the policy framework and strategies to effectively operate in times of crisis, PES need:

- Political priority and support, i.e. recognition of PES by policy makers, and formulation of a clear mandate;
- Sufficient and stable budget commitment at national level, including budget dedicated to funding innovations, adequate staff, and targeted human resources development;
- A digital strategy with priority services to be offered digitally as well as dedicated staff, and a specific budget that they can use quickly and flexibly to deal with cyclical changes;
- Sufficient IT infrastructure to be able to serve all people, including in remote and disadvantaged areas;
- An ongoing digital capacity building programme that addresses both users and staff of employment services and contributes to transforming digital culture in the long term;
- Simplified structures and processes that enable for agile and quick adaptations, including functioning processes for knowledge transfer both to the policy and the implementation level;
- To harness the potential of the whole ecosystem of employment services:
  - by establishing strategic cooperation frameworks with public and private actors, such as PrEAs, NGOs, ministries, education and (vocational) training institutions, employers and the business sector, social partners, and others to bridge gaps in service provision;
  - by using multi-stakeholder dialogue and cooperation approaches to include the concerns and needs related to the informal economy;
- To foster (cross-)regional exchange amongst national practitioners, i.e. through Communities of Practice;
- To make use of their convening power and include partnership building as a corner stone of PES’ post-COVID strategy.

<sup>31</sup> ILO Policy Brief: COVID-19 crisis and the informal economy: Immediate responses and policy challenges, ILO, May 2020.

<sup>32</sup> Trends and new developments in employment services to support transitions in Sub-Saharan Africa, the Middle East and North Africa Regions, ILO Working Paper 19, ILO, E. Davern, December 2020.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.



## OBJECTIVE 2: ENSURING LABOUR MARKET INCLUSIVENESS THROUGH BETTER SUPPORT FOR VULNERABLE GROUPS

Improving outreach and access through digital service provision and collaboration with local actors

The COVID-19 crisis has had particularly devastating effects on many vulnerable population groups and sectors around the globe. The ILO states that “young people, women, the low-paid and low-skilled workers have less potential to achieve recovery quickly, and the risk of long-term scarring and detachment from the labour market is all too real in their case”.<sup>35</sup> In the same paper it concludes that targeted policy measures are urgently needed, “since general support will not automatically reach them”. The pledge to **leave no one behind**, that has been formulated when adopting the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, has thus become more important than ever.<sup>36</sup> Also, the concept of **building back better** is key in this context, meaning not only getting economies and livelihoods back on their feet quickly, thus going back to ‘business as usual’, but also safeguarding prosperity for the longer term. Central to this approach is the transition to more inclusive and more resilient societies.<sup>37</sup>

To design and implement targeted strategies and services so that the recovery is embedded firmly in processes of inclusive and equitable growth, careful **monitoring of labour markets** is critical as well as the ability of PES for customer **profiling** and adjusting their services to the particular needs of the identified groups.<sup>38</sup> Evidence from partner countries illustrate instead of shows, that where advanced profiling instruments are applied, outreach to specific target groups could be increased.<sup>39</sup>

Experience from the YouMatch network has shown that reaching informal and low-skilled workers and people living in remote areas have proven particularly challenging already before the crisis. The situation however worsened during the crisis, to a great extent, due to travel restrictions and

distancing measures aimed at slowing the spread of the virus (the major difference to past downturns such as the 2008–2009 financial crisis, as the ILO states<sup>40</sup>, where labour market institutions had to deal with a fall in aggregate demand only).

The salient diagnosis made prior to the crisis is thus ever more valid now: PES must identify avenues to better reach beneficiaries belonging to disadvantaged groups and establish a network around the PES to better respond to the needs of vulnerable populations and territories. **A combination of digital service provision and support through local actors** can be a good strategy to compensate for lack of access to these target groups. While both topics have been covered already under Objective 1 with regards to the PES’ strategies in general, specific aspects relevant to the inclusion of vulnerable groups are further developed here.

### Digital service provision for vulnerable groups

Digital solutions usually reach young people who are well connected, mostly in urban areas, as most of them quickly adopt such technologies, as for instance Senegal’s experience with Skype-based job interviews shows. Often, however, overall **digital literacy** remains very limited. Despite the increasing use of smart phones in urban areas, a big share of beneficiaries often does not have the capacity to use digital tools to meet administrative needs. Still, information on the availability of services can be promoted online, e.g. through popular social networks with which even less digital-savvy groups who have access to smartphones are familiar, and video platforms such as YouTube used for presentations and trainings, e.g. on job search or basics of self-employment. More elaborated training courses with individual follow-up

<sup>35</sup> [ILO Monitor: COVID-19 and the world of work. Seventh edition, Updated estimates and analysis, ILO, 25 January 2021.](#)

<sup>36</sup> See for instance the [COVID-19 and the world of work: Ensuring no one is left behind in the response and recovery](#), ILO Policy Brief, ILO, June 2020.

<sup>37</sup> [OECD Policy Responses to Coronavirus \(COVID-19\). Building back better: A sustainable, resilient recovery after COVID-19, OECD, 5 June 2020.](#)

<sup>38</sup> For specific information on women and informal workers see the two ILO publications: 1) [The COVID-19 response: Getting gender equality right for a better future for women at work](#), ILO Policy Brief, ILO, 11 May 2020. 2) [COVID-19 crisis and the informal economy: Immediate responses and policy challenges](#), ILO Policy Brief, ILO, 05 May 2020.

<sup>39</sup> [Trends and new developments in employment services to support transitions in Sub-Saharan Africa, the Middle East and North Africa Regions](#), ILO Working Paper 19, ILO, E. Davern, December 2020.

<sup>40</sup> [ILO Policy Brief: COVID-19: Public employment services and labour market policy responses. August 2020.](#)

support for instance, can be offered through open-source learning management systems (Moodle is one option), but already require much more digital competences (from both PES staff and users).

One of the biggest challenges to the widespread use of digital tools is poor digital access in rural area by the more vulnerable groups. According to the YouMatch members, **the limited IT access, infrastructure, and devices**, including high costs for terminals (smart phones or tablets) and the absence, low connectivity, or low quality of networks in peripheral and other disadvantaged areas, constitute major obstacles to widespread use of digital solutions. Yet, poor IT infrastructure and low connectivity are usually only a matter of time, until national investments will reach most remote areas, and temporary low connectivity challenges can be compensated through **offline digital tools** and locally developed SD cards offerings.

It is therefore clear, that digital services have their limitations in a context with a huge digital divide that is expected to even increase because of the pandemic. Excluded groups therefore need to be approached offline, either through targeted analogue and face-to-face interventions or through adapted digital services. PES should give priority to these groups when it comes to individualised face-to-face interaction and digital literacy trainings. This also means that in-person assistance should go hand in hand with developing digital services and the needed skills to both offer and access those new services. This requires the development of a **blended channel strategy and outreach services in partnership with specialized stakeholders**.<sup>41</sup>

### **Collaboration with local stakeholders to serve remote and disadvantaged areas**

As mentioned above, collaboration with local stakeholders is considered of high importance regarding meeting the needs of vulnerable populations, and particularly in times of crisis, since local stakeholders have access to relevant information necessary to match local labour market demand and supply. This should also be reflected in

PES national and institutional strategies (see Objective 1) and capacities related to a regional approach to employment services be built. This includes, for instance, how to balance national policies and local flexibility, and how to establish and coordinate Local Employment Committees.<sup>42</sup>

Among the **local actors** identified as being able to play an important role in the process of economic integration and employment are: local authorities (elected or delegated by the central authority), traditional authorities, local professional associations (representatives of trades, trade unions, etc.), youth and civil society associations, and representatives from the social economy.

The **reasons for collaborating with local actors** are manifold: in principle, these stakeholders have a detailed knowledge of the local socio-economic situation. They can assess and anticipate trends in the rural labour market and validate them with local decision-makers. They can support the governance of the local employment sector, participate in the coordination and the financing of employment promotion activities at the local level, and provide employment services adapted to local needs. Furthermore, they can serve as local reference to support individual cases. Involving local stakeholders to bridge cultural and language divide also contributes to save time and resources.

As an example, the National Employment Agency (ANPE) of Benin, a member of the YouMatch network, is planning to collaborate with local councils to deploy their efforts in peripheral and rural areas. These local partners offer their infrastructure and staff to secure employment services' outreach for local job seekers. They provide basic information and the possibility of registering with the national agency. They organise training sessions on job search procedures. These local councils also play an important role in connecting with the local economic network to promote commitment or identify internship opportunities. For their part, locally based NGOs involved in employment issues can, for example, serve as a reference for candidates who only can participate in virtual interviews.

<sup>41</sup> See for instance: ILO/YouMatch Guidelines for setting up effective Job Centres in developing countries with reference to sub-Saharan Africa, the Middle East and North Africa Regions. Eamonn Davern and Michael Mwasikakata. Final draft before editing, July 2021.

<sup>42</sup> For more information see: [Guidelines for setting up local employment committees in West Africa](#). GIZ YouMatch – Global Initiative for Innovative Employment Services for Youth, GIZ, October 2020.

## CORE ISSUES OF OBJECTIVE 2

### To increase outreach to and access for vulnerable groups, PES need:

- To continue offering their services in a combination of tools, including online and offline, as well as other relevant means such as TV or radio, dedicating as much support as possible to clients in need of individualised face-to-face support;
- To address the problem of digital divide (related to skills and infrastructure), i.e. through establishing partnerships with specialized NGOs and other partners to proactively approach and better assist the excluded groups;
- A legislative and regulatory framework that enables PES agents to pro-actively establish partnerships with local stakeholders, i.e.:
  - Policy-oriented partnerships, e.g. in the form of Local Employment Committees to better analysing local labour markets and to elaborate and adapt local employment policies, and
  - Service-oriented partnerships, e.g. delegating services from PES to local NGOs to better reach vulnerable groups
- To consider multi-stakeholder approaches with well-balanced representation of public, private and civil society actors to create trust relationships with local stakeholders and involve them in the development and offer of employment services to vulnerable groups. This refers in particular to partnerships with the business sector and TVET institutions to create awareness about inclusion and enhance opportunities for vulnerable groups;
- Joint capacity building for local stakeholders and PES agents as well as shared governance;
- Recognition and valorisation of collaboration initiatives by leaders and decision-makers, including a common vision and the allocation of specific necessary financial and human resources.



## OBJECTIVE 3: STRENGTHENING RESILIENCE OF LABOUR MARKETS BY BETTER REACTING TO LABOUR MARKET NEEDS

Improving labour market information and job transition management

The COVID-19 crisis had lasting effects on the structure of the economy, leaving large numbers of skilled workers without jobs in certain sectors on the one hand, and opening new opportunities that require new skills, including digital, technical, and transversal skills such as communication and teamwork.<sup>43</sup>

In view of the rapid changes and job insecurity caused by the pandemic, the need to strengthen the resilience of the labour market is increasing. Here again, PES can make a significant contribution, notably by facilitating “successful labour market transitions and [reducing] skills mismatches, gaps and shortages, including for the low-skilled and the long-term unemployed”.<sup>44</sup> To be able to do so, they ought to understand the labour market needs and better manage job transitions and career changes, mainly through a set of tailor-made and demand-driven re-skilling and up-skilling services. Indeed, a recent and comprehensive study found that training measures are an effective instrument for employment, mainly in low- and middle-income countries for specific groups, e.g. women, and in combination with other supportive measures like counselling.<sup>45</sup>

### Adjusting employment services to manage job transitions

PES should primarily focus on employment integration for unemployed and career guidance services to secure transition from the education system to the job market, the so-called “school to work transition”. However, the role of PES should also go beyond this first mandate and anticipate future needs of the labour market in changing economies, notably to secure and manage effective job transition. While this is a critical part of an effective COVID-19 response and recovery, PES are often ill-equipped to do so. Accordingly, attempts

to increase the employability and skills of jobseekers “need to remain prominent even when unemployment starts falling, as the most employable clients leave the PES registers first, leaving behind those with fewer or mismatched skills”.<sup>46</sup> Due to prevailing gender biases on sides of the employers and gender stereotypes in society more attention should be paid to gender transformative approaches. In addition special attention should be given to women when offering upskilling and reskilling measures to guarantee their absorption in the labour market.<sup>47</sup> Also important to mention in this context is that “for the economic recovery from the COVID-19 crisis to be durable and resilient, a return to ‘business as usual’ and environmentally destructive investment patterns and activities must be avoided”.<sup>48</sup> This concept of ‘**building back better**’ therefore calls on all actors – including the PES – to promote a **green recovery and green job transitions**. PES would therefore need to be equipped with the relevant knowledge and skills.

The YouMatch network members mentioned the following areas that would need to be improved for PES to better support people’s transition to new jobs or sectors: On the one hand, PES need to better understand the jobseeker’s aspirations and skills. This requires the capacity to undertake **skills assessments** and **developing possible career paths** as well as more (and preferably face-to-face) interaction with jobseekers to define the individual’s professional project. On the other hand, job transition management requires a close collaboration between PES and the private sector, including from the informal sector and the social economy, to obtain relevant data on **employers’ skills needs and to develop and offer demand-driven, tailor made re- and up-skilling services** to jobseekers. Indeed, it is widely accepted that labour market orientation of training

43 See for instance the findings of the OECD with regards to five OECD countries: [OECD Policy Responses to Coronavirus \(COVID-19\). An assessment of the impact of COVID-19 on job and skills demand using online job vacancy data](#). OECD, 9 April 2021.

44 [Global call to action for a human-centred recovery from the COVID-19 crisis that is inclusive, sustainable and resilient](#), ILO Resolution I, International Labour Conference – 109th Session, ILO, 17 June 2021.

45 [Assessment of the effectiveness of active labour market policies in crisis and post crisis situations. Summary of the ETF draft report, forthcoming 2021, ETF, 2021.](#)

46 [OECD Policy Responses to Coronavirus \(COVID-19\). Designing active labour market policies for the recovery](#), OECD, 15 July 2021.

47 [Building Forward Fairer: Women’s rights to work and at work at the core of the COVID-19 recovery](#), ILO Policy Brief, ILO, July 2021.

48 [OECD Policy Responses to Coronavirus \(COVID-19\). Building back better: A sustainable, resilient recovery after COVID-19](#), OECD, 5 June 2020.

programmes strongly depends on the involvement of social partners and the active participation of companies.<sup>49</sup> Also, training providers with a close link to the economy are key, even with the informal economy, as a majority of jobseekers may be absorbed by the informal job market in most of the partner countries. Collecting data on skills needed in the informal economy should be an integral part of labour market monitoring systems.

### Improving labour market information

The capacities of PES in identifying labour market needs and anticipating demanded skills are essential and need to be strengthened, because there is a crucial lack of reliable data to accompany and anticipate the future demand in labour markets in the region. Integrated Labour Market Information Systems (ILMIS) can help tackle labour market, employment and skills development challenges inclusively, and strongly improve the production of labour statistics.<sup>50</sup> Yet, they are usually complex and expensive to set-up and rather difficult to maintain; while the limited capacity for analysing the data is another constraint. In spite of these difficulties, it is a necessity to collect disaggregated data to respond to labour market challenges with targeted and specific services (see Objective 2). Therefore, in many situations and particularly in fragile and fast-changing ones like the COVID-19 crisis, pragmatic alternatives may be more suitable to get started. This is especially true for the African and Middle Eastern context with its predominant informal sectors.

There are various approaches, methodologies, and systems<sup>51</sup>, as well as various options for practitioners to learn about **anticipating skills needs and matching supply and demand** in the labour market. The Ugandan

members of YouMatch, for instance, participated in an online training course offered by the ILO's International Training Centre<sup>52</sup>, where these issues are addressed within a broader context of labour market information and intelligence and related institutional frameworks. Given the time pressure related to the COVID-19 crisis, the ILO, supported by the Skills Initiative for Africa (SIFA), developed guidelines on Rapid Assessment of re- and upskilling needs in response to the pandemic.<sup>53</sup> The SIFA project is now piloting the guidelines in four African countries.

A pragmatic and always recommended option is the **use of synergies** with existing training and capacity building projects or other initiatives, that already collect such data, or combining resources across agencies to conduct more thorough assessments.<sup>54</sup> In Benin, for instance, the PES is able to participate in established structures that bring together the key players in the world of work (including the informal sector) and ensure monitoring in terms of regulation between supply and demand in terms of skills and quantity of labour. For the PES, this is an excellent way of consolidating the data necessary for professional reorientation. In practice, however, studies often remain autonomous, and the results are not made publicly available. Therefore, it is recommended to explore “whether labour market assessments could extend beyond a single study in order to strengthen the country's Labour Market Information System (LMIS), either by involving relevant stakeholders in the implementation of a study and/or by having targeted activities to build institutional capacity within the relevant local structures, such as labour market observatories or sector skills councils”.<sup>55</sup>

49 See for instance 4th UfM Ministerial Declaration on Employment and Labour, 2019.

50 Working Group Labour Market Information (LMI). Guidelines on establishing Labour Market Information Systems to support effective Labour Market Governance in Africa. GIZ YouMatch – Global Initiative for Innovative Employment Services for Youth, GIZ, October 2020.

51 See for instance the very comprehensive document: Compendium of Tools for Labour Market Assessment, EU VET Toolbox, GIZ, February 2020.

52 E-Learning Course on Skills Anticipation and Matching, 2 November – 18 December 2020, ITC ILO.

53 Guidelines on Rapid Assessment of reskilling and upskilling needs in response to the COVID-19 crisis. Geneva, International Labour Office, ILO, 07 August 2020.

54 Compendium of Tools for Labour Market Assessment, EU VET Toolbox, GIZ, February 2020.

55 Ibid.

### CORE ISSUES OF OBJECTIVE 3

**For better understanding labour markets and managing job transitions, PES need:**

- Reliable, up-to-date, and comprehensive labour market data and tools to anticipate skills needs and guide requalification and upskilling projects. Relevant institutions should have incentives to share their labour market data and a governance should be put in place to secure dialogue amongst relevant stakeholders;
- Training on how to analyse and effectively use labour market data for skills development policies and activities and job matching purposes;
- Good coordination between the various public services (statistics offices, concerned ministries, vocational training and education, universities and research institutions, etc.) to identify trends and harmonise their policies and actions;
- To promote a green recovery and green job transitions, notably by identifying new opportunities for job seekers and job creation in this field and supporting the individuals accordingly, to contribute to a durable and resilient recovery from the crisis;
- To collaborate with education providers with a close link to the economy in order to develop demand-driven up- and re-skilling services;
- To integrate local stakeholders – including the social economy – and the informal sector to identify and anticipate the needs of the respective labour market;
- Specific capacity building to support skills assessments and the development of career paths, as well as related to digital and soft skills in the context of New Work.
- Reliable, disaggregated labour market data on effects on disadvantaged groups, including women and people with disabilities.



# Conclusions

To optimise public employment services, managers and policymakers have a wide range of policy levers at their disposal which do not require profound change. However, responses to the needs of the PES and beneficiaries to make the labour market more resilient will only bring their maximum benefits if they are implemented simultaneously. Indeed, it is easy to see that action on only one aspect will not work without making changes in the other aspects. Efforts to promote digitalisation will hardly bear fruit without intensifying collaboration with local actors. A labour market intelligence project to better support career transitions will hardly work without adequate digital means and increased collaboration between government services. And of course, all these measures must be provided with adequate human and financial resources. The paper intended to provide an account of some of the priorities set by members of the YouMatch network on the ground on the aspects of PES that need to be strengthened in order to guarantee their viable contribution to post-COVID-19 recovery. The selected aspects, labelled as objectives, are

- i) enhancing efficiency and effectiveness through a review of PES strategies;
- ii) ensuring labour market inclusiveness through better support for vulnerable groups and
- iii) strengthening resilience of labour markets by better reacting to labour market needs

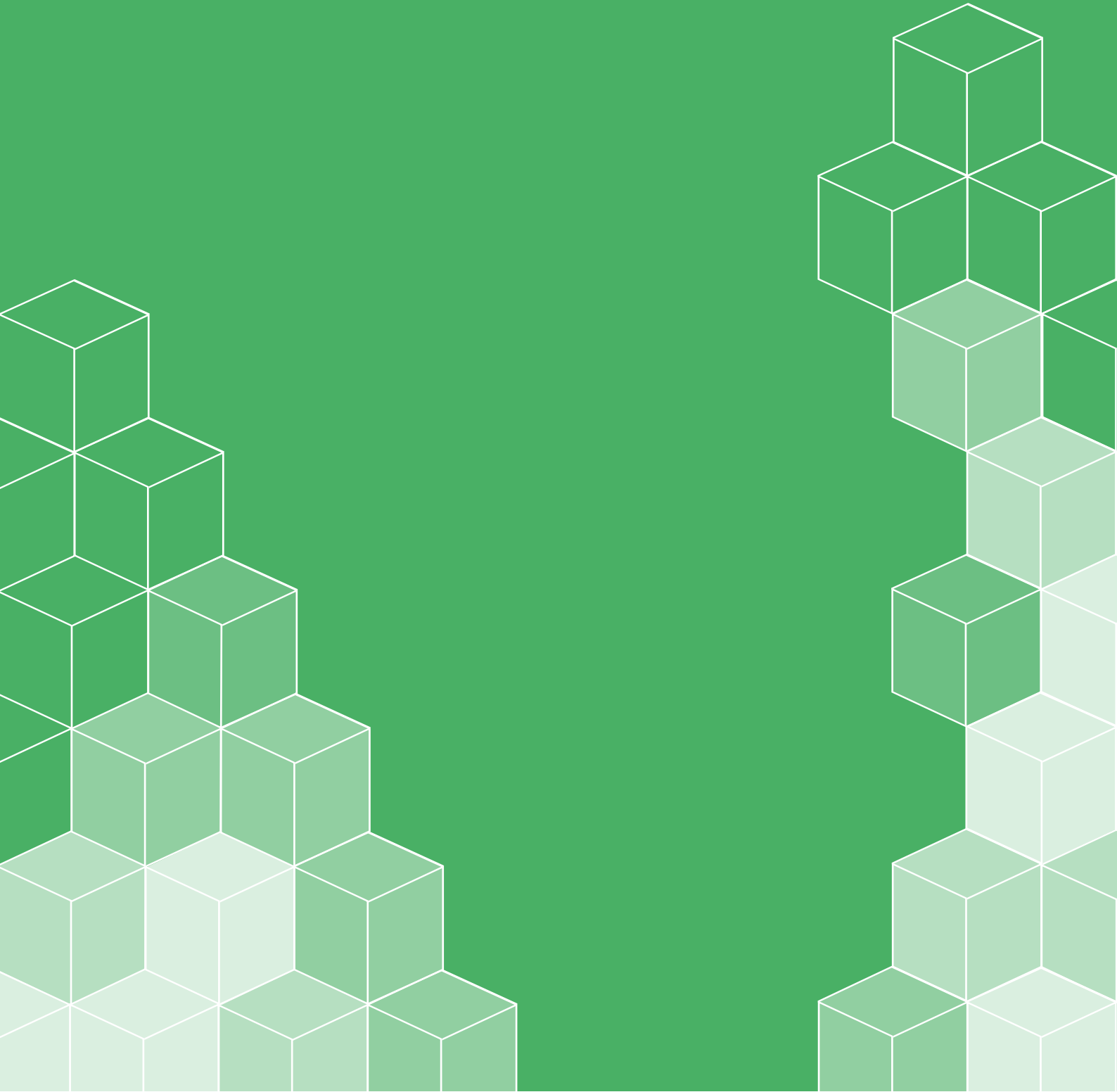
These objectives are far from offering a comprehensive analysis of required actions on the ground, but instead propose a subjective selection of priorities that need urgent political commitment and policy visibility. Only a systemic and unifying impetus from the top level of leadership or decision making can set in motion all the forces and means necessary for the PES to deploy their full potential in strengthening the resilience of the labour market.

By strongly supporting the PES as key link in matching

labour market demand and supply, leaders and policy makers invest in the fight against precariousness and poverty and contribute to the prevention of public health and safety problems.

Analysis of the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the job market but also on livelihood show that already vulnerable groups and women are disproportionately affected, that socio-economic disparities between rural and urban areas are increasing, and that developing countries, notably from the region of Africa and the Middle East, are likely to face lasting consequences on their economies and development. In this context, the premise to **leave no one behind** and **building back better** resonate particularly strongly. It is therefore a necessity to identify approaches that will provide the necessary outreach and innovation to propose new and better ways to support recovery, including through encompassing digital strategies and multi-stakeholder approaches that avoid sectorial responses in silos.

More systemic digital and inclusive approaches necessarily call for more specific and targeted interventions. This also means to readjust the current provision of services to gain efficiency in financial and human resources, which in turn can be reinvested more strategically into time- and human- intensive targeted interventions for selected vulnerable groups. Overall PES strategies need to provide better mandates and frameworks to do so quickly and in an agile manner, as well as to allow the involvement of external stakeholders that complement and expand the reach of traditional PES services. Some of the elements suggested in this paper under the three main objectives go exactly in this direction and offer policy makers with a first set of actions required in the region of Africa and the Middle East.



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