

The G20 in a Post-COVID-19 World: Bridging the Skills Gaps

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ABSTRACT The COVID-19 pandemic is transforming the world of work. As new occupations are emerging in this digitised landscape, the skills and competencies required for jobs are evolving as well. This brief examines the skills gaps that persist across the G20 countries, and argues that they will need to adapt their education and training mechanisms to the changing skills requirements. Although nearly all presidencies of the G20 forum have prioritised youth employment and skills development, jobs growth—particularly among the youth—remains weak. Given that the top three countries with the largest offline populations in the world are all G20 members, the disparities are likely to widen in the coming months. It is imperative for the upcoming G20 presidencies to place skills development high on the group’s agenda.

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INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic, which has caused over a million deaths across much of the world, brought economic activity to a near-standstill in the early months of the outbreak as countries were forced to impose tight restrictions to control the spread of the virus. The impact of the pandemic on global economic activity has been far worse than anticipated, and the recovery is expected to be slow.¹ According to the World Economic Outlook, global growth is projected at negative 4.4 percent in 2020, in what is being described as the deepest global recession in decades.² While the world grapples with such economic fallout, the worst affected are the youth, who face mass unemployment and loss of jobs.³ More than one-sixth of the global youth population have been displaced from their work due to COVID-19, while those who are employed have seen their working hours cut by 23 percent.⁴ Additionally, the abrupt and unexpected transition to online platforms for work and skill development has deepened the already-existing digital divide: the countries with better internet connectivity and hardware have benefitted, and the poorer ones have been left behind.⁵

Of the various enduring consequences of the 2008 financial crisis—the most recent global economic disaster before COVID-19—the most challenging and significant was youth unemployment in developed and developing countries. In the absence of any targeted intervention, estimates for global youth unemployment post-COVID-19 are expected to surpass those seen in the wake of the 2008 crisis.⁶ At that time, it was the G20 that played a key role in bringing its member

states—comprising two-thirds of the world population and 90 percent of global GDP—together in one common platform.⁷ The pandemic and its economic consequences have renewed the need for the G20 countries to work together to tackle challenges that extend beyond their borders.

With remote work becoming the new norm, a global reappraisal of the care economy, forced digitalisation and increasing automation, the world of work is transforming. New occupations are emerging and replacing others,⁸ and as they become more digitised and knowledge-based, the skills and competencies required are evolving as well. As a result, a set of emerging roles will gain significantly, even as another set of job profiles become increasingly redundant.⁹

Amidst the pandemic, as huge numbers of displaced workers with limited skills seek to regain their livelihoods and employers struggle to hire people with the right skills set, it is imperative for the G20 to devise strategies to strengthen the global skilling ecosystem. This will enable workers to regain incomes and achieve career goals by securing quality jobs while catering to the needs of the employer and the job. In the past, the G20 has actively engaged in bridging the gap in skilling, training and employability.¹⁰ It is expected that the G20, through collective actions and coordinated policies, will take the lead in seeking short- and long-term solutions to the global issue of the widening skills gap.

SKILLING ON THE G20 AGENDA

Employment and skilling have long been a top priority for the G20. Although the first G20

summit in Washington DC (2008) focused almost exclusively on the global financial crisis, leaders who gathered in April 2009 at the second summit in London recognised the role of employment in achieving a smooth and sustained recovery.¹¹ Since then, employment and skills have been on the agenda of almost all G20 presidencies.

In the aftermath of the 2008 global recession, a severe labour market crisis led to political turmoil in many G20 countries. At the third G20 summit in Pittsburgh in September 2009, G20 leaders recognised the need to put quality jobs at the heart of the recovery process and agreed to support robust training efforts as part of their growth strategies and investment. The member states also committed to adopting key elements of the Global Jobs Pact by the International Labour Organization (ILO).¹²

On the recommendation of the G20 leaders, the ILO, in partnership with other international organisations, employers and workers, developed a training strategy that was submitted to and welcomed by the leaders at the fourth G20 summit in June 2010 in Toronto.¹³ The G20 Training Strategy drew on international experiences and put forward the “essential building blocks of a robust training strategy”.¹⁴ At the next summit in November 2010 in Seoul, building on the G20 Training Strategy and based on the conceptual framework laid down by it, leaders pledged to continue to support national strategies for skills development.¹⁵ The summit saw significant progress being made on putting development concretely on the G20 agenda by building consensus on 25 clear and future-oriented commitments. These related to

development (20 targets); development and employment (two); and employment alone (three)—in what would be known as the Seoul Development Consensus.¹⁶

The commitments on development focused on enhancing infrastructure financing and improving financial inclusion. The first development-employment commitment focused on improving the “development of employable skills matched to employer and labour market needs in order to enhance the ability to attract investment, create decent jobs and increase productivity,” while the second built on the G20 Training Strategy and focused on supporting the “development of internationally comparable skills indicators and enhancement of national strategies for skill development”. The three commitments on employment focused on fostering job creation, investment and innovation, and education and training.¹⁷

Despite the Seoul Development Consensus’s development-employment commitments, the post-financial crisis recovery process left behind a generation of vulnerable youth.¹⁸ At the Cannes summit in November 2011, leaders recognised the need for active employment policies, especially for the young and other vulnerable groups, and agreed to set up an intergovernmental task force on employment.¹⁹ The next summit in Mexico (June 2012) discussed quality employment and youth employment. The task force created at the Cannes summit presented its findings in Mexico and discussed measures to promote youth employment. Also in Mexico, the G20 leaders committed to creating high-quality jobs and opportunities and issued the Los Cabos Growth and Jobs

Action Plan.²⁰ Cooperation in education, skill development and training policies, including internships and on-the-job trainings for successful school-to-work transition, was also on the agenda.²¹

At the Saint Petersburg summit in September 2013, a progress report was presented on countries' adherence to the commitments laid out in the Los Cabos Plan. Reiterating the importance of skilling the youth, the G20 leaders declared that a global knowledge-sharing platform on skills for employment, through the public-private partnership model, will be launched and national action plans on skills for employment in low-income countries will be developed. Leaders also agreed on the development of a database on skill indicators.²² Reducing youth employment and promoting skill development was also a priority area for the Australian G20 presidency in November 2014. Building on this, the leaders agreed to renew the commitments on youth made at the meetings of G20 labour and employment ministers in Paris (2011), Guadalajara (2012), and Moscow (2013), and focused on access to quality education and skills development.²³ Further, recognising the labour market challenges faced by the global economy, the G20 leaders recommended the establishment of an Employment Working Group, which was set up in 2015 under the Turkish presidency. At the G20 summit in Turkey, labour and employment ministers welcomed a G20 Skills Strategy, which contained actionable principles based on the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development Skills Strategy (2012) and the

G20 Training Strategy (2010).²⁴ Leaders also agreed on a target to reduce the share of young people at risk of being permanently left behind in the labour market by 15 percent by 2025 under the G20 Policy Principles for Promoting Better Youth Employment Outcomes, or the Antalya Youth Goal.²⁵

Leaders continued to focus on skill development at the G20 summit in China (2016), which recognised the need to make technical and vocational education and training more accessible and effective.²⁶ At the 2017 G20 summit in Hamburg, leaders welcomed the initiative on digital skills in vocational education and training under the forum's priorities on the future of work.²⁷ To support skill development and to ensure that the future of work is equitable and inclusive, the G20 guidelines on skills for an inclusive future of work were published during the Argentina summit (2018).²⁸ In 2019 in Japan, leaders continued to support efforts for skills development, with a focus on promoting women's entrepreneurship.²⁹ Under the current Saudi presidency, youth employment has been a priority area and the first meeting of the G20 Employment Working Group focused on youth employment.³⁰ The leaders agreed to monitor the progress of countries towards meeting the Antalya Youth Goal, which measures the numbers of those not in employment, education or training.³¹

EMPLOYMENT TRENDS AND SKILLS COMPOSITION OF JOBS

When the COVID-19 pandemic struck in early 2020, the global economy was beginning to

make a modest recovery.³² Within the G20, such progress ran parallel to weak employment growth; the jobs gap was fast widening in various G20 countries.³³ In 2019, of the 3.8 billion working-age population in all G20 countries, some 1.5 billion were out of the labour force, while about 280 million others were underutilised.³⁴ At 18.21 percent in 2019, the youth unemployment rate in G20 countries was at a historic high, ranging from a modest 3.7 percent in Japan to a high 56 percent in South Africa (see Figure 1).³⁵ Only four G20 countries (Japan, Germany, Mexico and the US) exhibited single-digit youth unemployment rates.

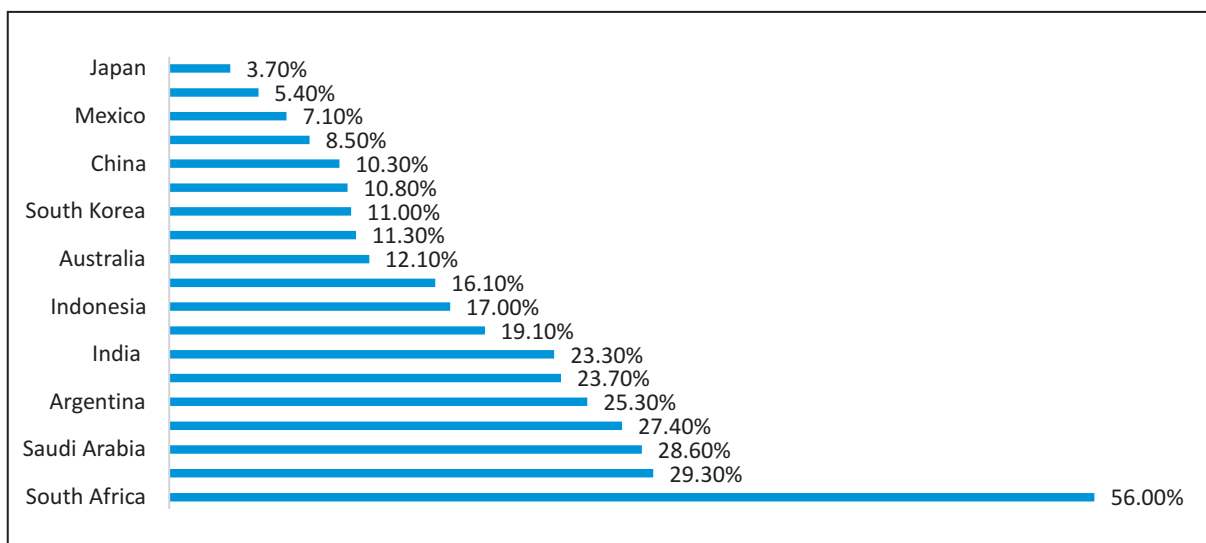
To be sure, the Fourth Industrial Revolution had already begun to transform the world of work even before COVID-19. The outbreak has only accelerated the process.³⁶ Evolving technology, globalisation impacts and climate change had already displaced various sections of workers by altering the skills set demanded by industry. In most G20 countries, the demand for high-level cognitive

and social skills grew as job prospects dropped for those whose skill sets did not match.³⁷ At the same time, in a few G20 economies, the supply of a skilled workforce exceeded the demand.³⁸

Indeed, there is disparity in the skills composition of jobs across the G20 countries (see Figure 2).³⁹ In India, for example, in 2018, 30.7 percent of jobs required nothing more than primary education, whereas merely 11.9 percent of jobs required an advanced degree. On the other hand, a majority of jobs in South Korea needed an advanced degree (56.01 percent), while a negligible proportion required less than basic education (0.15 percent).

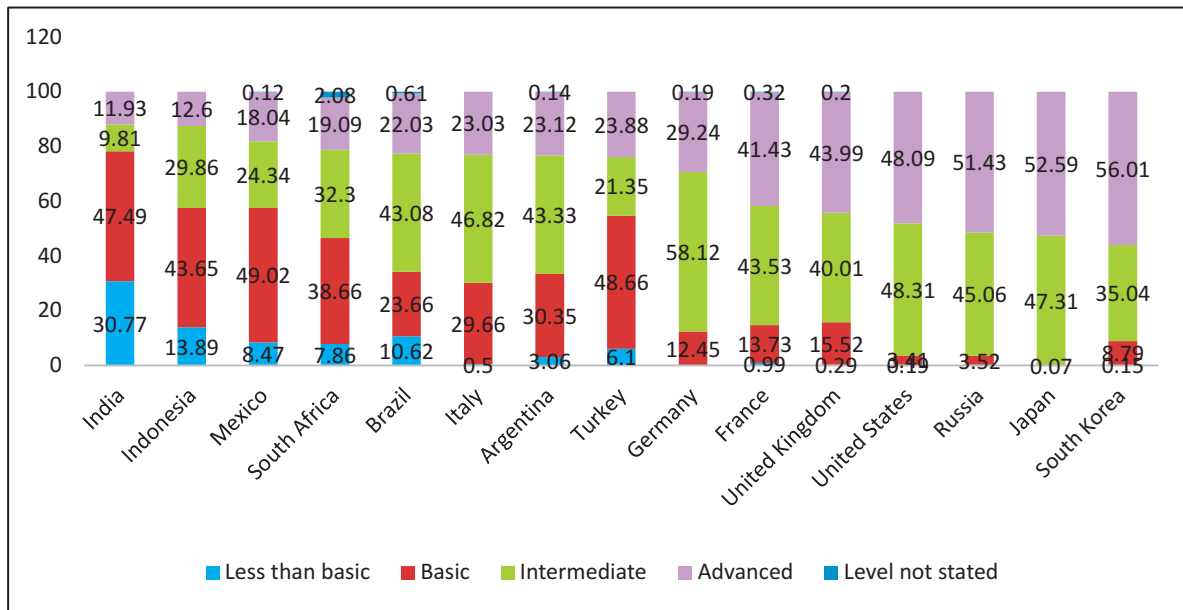
These inter-country disparities will only widen in the aftermath of COVID-19. As technology becomes an even more significant part of daily life—from telehealth services and robotic process automation, to virtual classrooms—consumer behaviour patterns and the global business environment are

Figure 1: Youth Unemployment Rate in Select G20 Countries (2019)



Source: International Labour Organization⁴⁰

Figure 2: Skills Composition of Jobs in Select G20 Countries (2018)



Source: International Labour Organization⁴¹

transforming.⁴² While this transformation is expected to offer increased employment opportunities for the skilled, it could mean large-scale job losses for the low-skilled and unskilled.

According to a World Economic Forum survey (conducted in September-October 2020), over half of all working adults fear losing their job in the aftermath of COVID-19.⁴³ In the G20 countries, job-loss concerns among working adults was the highest in Russia (75 percent), lowest in Germany (26 percent), and was at 57 percent in India.⁴⁴ Access to technology is a major source of inequality and vulnerability and has been aggravated by COVID-19.⁴⁵ Given that the top three countries globally with the largest offline populations are all G20 members (India, China and Indonesia⁴⁶), the upcoming presidencies must place skills development high on the G20 agenda.

INDIA'S SKILLS CRISIS

For emerging economies like India, the G20 has proved to be an effective platform to advance an inclusive global economic framework that attempts to realise equitable outcomes. India will soon be joining the G20 Troika—a three-country committee consisting the current, immediate past, and next presidencies (host countries)—as it prepares to assume the presidency in 2022. As a young nation, with about 62 percent of its population in the working-age group (15-59 years) and more than 50 percent below 25 years,⁴⁷ India has great potential to drive growth on the back of its working-age population.⁴⁸ However, this large and young labour pool could prove to be a double-edged sword. Although India's demographic dividend is an opportunity for higher growth, it has not translated into productive employment for young workers.⁴⁹ A mere two

percent of India's total workforce is skilled, compared to 96 percent in South Korea, 45 percent in China, 55 percent in the US, and 74 percent in Germany.⁵⁰

The lack of adequate skills and education levels, coupled with the shortage of jobs, will impede India's growth.^{51,52,53} Moreover, India's higher education sector has failed to equip workers with the skills and competencies required in the global knowledge economy.^{54,55,56,57} The unemployment rate among India's educated was estimated at 11.4 percent by the 2017-18 Periodic Labour Force Survey.⁵⁸ According to the All India Council for Technical Education, over 60 percent of 800,000 engineers graduating from technical institutions across the country each year remain unemployed.⁵⁹ According to the 68th round of the National Sample Survey, 68 percent of graduates and 53 percent of postgraduates from general education backgrounds were unemployed; so were 45 percent of graduates or postgraduates and 51 percent of graduate or postgraduate diploma holders from technical fields.⁶⁰

Despite a sizeable share of India's population (62 percent) being in the working-age group, half do not contribute to any economic activity.⁶¹ On the sidelines of the 2015 G20 summit in Turkey, India and the UK partnered with the other G20 countries to tackle youth unemployment by sharing best practices and boosting skills and training opportunities. But India appears to be lagging far behind the youth employment target set by G20 countries in Turkey. In 2009, under the National Policy for Skill Development and Entrepreneurship, the Indian government aimed to skill 402 million

workers by 2022 to meet the emerging requirements of Indian industry and become a global hub for trained workforce.⁶² Estimates show that India is far from achieving this goal. With the economic consequences of COVID-19 likely to be protracted, India must learn from the past experiences of other G20 countries on tackling the issues of skills shortages and youth unemployment. For instance, Germany successfully eased labour market entry through an extensive dual education system that combines subsidised classes at vocational institutions with on-the-job apprenticeship training.⁶³ Given India's burgeoning skills crisis, it must make skills development and youth employability core priorities when it takes over the G20 presidency in 2022.

RECOMMENDATIONS

A significant challenge in all G20 countries is to enhance the responsiveness of education and training mechanisms to the changing skills requirements, and simultaneously improve access to skills development processes. Any skill development process is a shared responsibility, as it affects all stakeholders. A whole-of-government and multi-stakeholder approach is needed for effective policy implementation. The G20 has an opportunity to prove it is an influential global forum for collective action. World leaders need to cooperate and ramp up joint efforts in equipping the workforce with the skills necessary for future jobs.

One of the most substantial impacts of the growing skills gap is on youth employability. Unemployment rate among the youth across all G20 countries (13.1 percent in 2017) is on

average 2.5 times the overall unemployment rate.⁶⁴ In developing countries, two-thirds of all young people are either unemployed or trapped in low-quality jobs.⁶⁵

Countries need to jointly invest in high-quality early childhood education, especially for the poor. Collective efforts need to be made to invest in qualified teaching staff and maintain high teacher-student ratios. Governments must engage with the private sector to provide job-search and job-matching assistance to workers through counselling, by strengthening public employment services and by running free educational programmes. Some countries, including India, are already stepping up efforts to source and curate jobs through job-matching services to restore the jobs lost due to pandemic-induced lockdowns.⁶⁶ While these job-matching services can bring job seekers and employers to one platform, it must be complemented with efforts to address skills mismatches in the labour market to ensure a better and improved matching of vacancies. Infosys, for instance, launched the 'Reskill and Restart' solution in the US to reskill the workforce and fulfil employment needs.⁶⁷ By complementing job matching services with reskilling, career-coaching, workshops and networking events, employers can effectively review the available talent pool to find the right match.

Amidst uncertainty and widespread fear of job loss, labour regulations play a crucial role by providing a strong foundation for policy responses and in adopting a human-centred approach to growth and development. Labour regulations should be in tune with the existing market conditions to stimulate demand while protecting workers' interests. The ILO has

presented a policy framework to help countries mitigate the impacts of COVID-19 on the world of work, which lays out three key pillars based on international labour standards: protecting workers in the workplace; stimulating the economy and labour demand; and supporting employment and incomes.⁶⁸

With the pandemic redefining occupations and transforming the world of work, there is a need to identify future job roles and redevelop global occupation and qualification standards to be consistent across industries. The G20 should work towards building consensus on globally uniform occupation and qualification standards to facilitate skilling at a macro level. Further, given that remote working will likely be the new norm, the G20 must ramp up the global skills development ecosystem to facilitate virtual programmes and digital learning.

CONCLUSION

Preparing the workforce with the skills required for jobs today and in the future is a universal concern for all nations. A country's prosperity is determined by the number of people employed and their productivity levels, which in turn is dependent on their skills and how effectively these are utilised. As countries continue to grapple with the economic consequences of COVID-19, employers and firms are struggling to employ people with the requisite skills set. In the past, the G20 has effectively played its crisis-management role; it should step up to address the current employability challenges and devise strategies to strengthen the global skilling ecosystem.

Indeed, skills development is a global challenge, and countries must coordinate in policymaking in order to promote opportunities for people to reskill and upskill to adapt to change successfully. While some G20 countries like India could still reap a sizeable demographic dividend, the situation in the advanced economies may

worsen in the coming years as the existing skilled workforce will retire and will not be replaceable in full. This presents India with the opportunity to supply labour to the other G20 economies if it is able to provide skills development programmes for the youth that conform to the emerging needs of the global economy. [ORF](#)

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