



Case Study

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Implementing the National Employment Policy in Times of Crisis: A Qualitative Case Study of Benin's National Employment Agency (AnpE)

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Abstract: This study evaluates the effectiveness of Benin's National Employment Agency (AnpE) in implementing the National Employment Policy, focusing on initiatives conducted in 2020. Employment challenges, particularly among youth and women, motivated the analysis of key programs such as the Independent Employment Support Program (PAEI) and Partnerships for Decentralized Employment (PaDE). Using a qualitative methodology, data were collected from AnpE's 2020 Annual Report and interviews with stakeholders, including employers and job seekers, to assess program implementation and obstacles. Findings reveal that despite a budget mobilization rate of 77%, AnpE achieved notable progress, though constrained by funding limitations, COVID-19 disruptions, and limited access to remote areas. Program-specific results show that PAEI reached 59.1% physical execution but only 43.2% financial execution, while PaDE attained higher physical execution but faced budgetary limits. The study concludes that digital transformation, hybrid service models, strengthened public-private partnerships, and localized policy adaptations are critical to enhancing employment outcomes in Benin and can inform similar agencies in comparable contexts.

Keywords: Employment Policy, AnpE, Vulnerable Groups, Program Effectiveness, Digital Transformation.

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INTRODUCTION

Disability sports training policy is critical in impacting knowledge to persons with disabilities in sports participation. An impact review of sport Northern Ireland's disability mainstreaming policy (Wharton Consulting Review, 2006-2010) aimed to put disability sport to the fore-front of people's developing minds in implementing programs and services aimed at delivering on sport Northern Ireland's core business objectives of; increasing participation in sport and physical recreation, improving sports performance and improved efficiency and effectiveness in the administration of sports for PWDs.

Unemployment is a persistent issue for many developing nations, particularly in Africa, where rapid demographic growth exceeds the rate of economic expansion (African Development Bank, 2021). In response to high unemployment rates, the government of Benin has developed a National Employment Policy aimed at addressing structural unemployment and enhancing workforce readiness (International Labour Organization [ILO], 2018). This policy focuses on vulnerable populations, especially youth and women, who face significant employment barriers (World Bank, 2021). It prioritizes initiatives designed to cultivate employability skills, encourage self-employment, and increase access to sustainable work opportunities, all crucial for long-term economic stability. The National

Employment Agency (AnpE) was established by a 2003 decree and refined by a 2015 decree as the primary institution tasked with executing Benin's employment policy (Gouvernement de la République du Bénin, 2015). Operating today under the Ministry of Small and Medium Enterprises and Employment Promotion, AnpE connects job seekers with employers, provides job-related training, and offers job search support, with a focus on bridging the skills gap (Ministère des Petites et Moyennes Entreprises et de la Promotion de l'Emploi (MPMEPE), 2020). Through its various programs, including the Independent Employment Support Program (PAEI) and Partnerships for Decentralized Employment (PaDE), AnpE addresses both urban and rural employment needs, adapting its services to match local labor market demands (Agence nationale pour l'Emploi [AnpE], 2021).

This study examines AnpE's implementation of Benin's National Employment Policy, drawing on qualitative data from the agency's 2020 annual report and interviews with key stakeholders. By analyzing AnpE's performance amidst the challenges of limited funding and the COVID-19 pandemic, the study evaluates program-specific execution rates and identifies barriers to successful employment interventions.

Overview of the National Employment Agency (AnpE)

As the principal implementing institution of Benin's National Employment Policy, the National Employment Agency (AnpE) serves a pivotal role in combating youth unemployment and advancing professional integration across both urban and rural communities (MPMEPE, 2020). Charged with translating policy into action, AnpE works collaboratively with a wide range of national ministries, decentralized public authorities, private sector partners, and international organizations to strengthen labor market outcomes and expand opportunities for job seekers at all levels.

To fulfill its mandate, AnpE undertakes a range of core functions essential for effective labor market governance. These include the collection, analysis, and dissemination of high-quality labor market data and indicators, which support evidence-based decision-making by policymakers, employers, and development partners (AnpE, 2021). In parallel, the Agency promotes skills development through targeted vocational training, career guidance, and employment services, helping to reduce skills mismatches and enhance the employability of young people entering and re-entering the workforce (African Union, 2019). By facilitating communication and linkages between job seekers, employers, and training providers, AnpE contributes to more dynamic and responsive labor market interactions.

Beyond direct employment facilitation, AnpE actively promotes self-employment and entrepreneurship as viable pathways to sustainable livelihoods. Through flagship initiatives such as the Programme d'Appui à l'Emploi des Jeunes (PAEI) and the Programme d'Appui au Développement des Entreprises (PaDE), the Agency supports young entrepreneurs in developing business competencies, accessing resources, and launching income-generating activities, particularly in underserved and economically disadvantaged regions (UNESCO, 2021). These programs reflect growing evidence that entrepreneurship can be a powerful engine for job creation and economic inclusion across Africa's rapidly expanding youth population (World Bank, 2021). In addition, AnpE's emphasis on local economic development and decentralized employment solutions aligns with broader continental and global trends that prioritize community-driven approaches to economic empowerment (UNECA, 2019). By tailoring employment interventions to the specific needs and potentials of local contexts, the Agency helps to stimulate grassroots economic activity and strengthen regional resilience. Through its integrated strategies, partnerships, and programs, AnpE not only contributes to reducing unemployment but also supports inclusive and sustainable

development across Benin's diverse socio-economic landscape.

Employment agencies vs. unemployment reduction

In Benin, as in many Sub-Saharan African countries, the National Employment Agency (AnpE) functions as a central institution for implementing the country's National Employment Policy, with a particular focus on addressing the persistent challenge of youth unemployment. According to the International Labour Organization (ILO, 2020), employment agencies play a critical role in bridging the gap between labor market demands and workforce skills, particularly in regions where structural unemployment and underemployment are prevalent. AnpE's operational strategies align closely with global best practices recommended by international labor organizations, which advocate for integrated approaches that combine vocational skills training, employment matching services, entrepreneurship support, and active labor market policies. Such a multi-pronged strategy not only addresses immediate job placement needs but also contributes to the longer-term goal of fostering a resilient, adaptable, and skilled workforce capable of sustaining economic growth in Benin.

A central pillar of AnpE's strategy is the provision of training programs aimed at enhancing both technical and entrepreneurial competencies among job seekers (AnpE, 2021). By offering courses in business management, vocational skills, and digital literacy, the agency seeks to equip young people with the tools necessary to navigate a rapidly changing labor market. In parallel, AnpE's support for self-employment initiatives, including micro-grants, mentorship programs, and guidance on establishing small enterprises, demonstrates an understanding that sustainable employment in Benin cannot rely solely on formal job creation (MPMEPE, 2020). Rather, fostering entrepreneurship and independent economic activity among youth represents a strategic response to structural labor market constraints, particularly in a context where private sector growth may be insufficient to absorb all job seekers (ILO, 2020; World Bank, 2020). These interventions reflect a broader international consensus that integrated employment strategies, which combine skill development with income-generation support, are among the most effective ways to combat youth unemployment.

Despite these innovative approaches, AnpE faces significant challenges in achieving its objectives, many of which are shared by public employment services across Sub-Saharan Africa (AnpE, 2020). Resource limitations, high demand for services, and the need for sustained support structures often constrain the agency's ability to reach all segments of the population effectively. Funding shortages, in particular, limit the scale and continuity of programs, making it difficult to maintain long-term interventions or expand services into rural and remote areas where unemployment is often most acute.

High demand for employment services also creates operational pressures, necessitating prioritization of program beneficiaries and sometimes leaving vulnerable populations underserved. In response, AnpE has increasingly sought to develop partnerships with private sector actors, local governments, and international development agencies to leverage additional resources, technical expertise, and innovative solutions to local employment challenges (African Union Commission and International Labour Organization, 2019; World Bank, 2021).

A unique challenge facing public employment agencies in Benin, and in Sub-Saharan Africa more broadly, is the predominance of informal employment. Informal work constitutes a substantial portion of the labor market, particularly among youth, women, and rural populations, and is often characterized by low wages, limited job security, and the absence of social protections (World Bank, 2024). This dynamic complicates the traditional mandate of employment agencies, which have historically focused on formal sector employment. Integrating informal workers into the formal economy requires carefully designed interventions that extend beyond simple job placement, encompassing financial literacy programs, access to microfinance, legal protections, and technical support for small businesses. In this regard, AnpE's initiatives, which include entrepreneurship training, business incubation support, and formal employment matching, are particularly significant (MPMEPE, 2020). These programs not only provide pathways for informal workers to transition into more stable, formal employment but also contribute to broader national objectives of poverty reduction, social protection, and inclusive economic growth.

The importance of supporting informal workers through structured employment programs is well-documented in empirical research. Studies indicate that such interventions can improve labor market outcomes, enhance income stability, and increase overall economic productivity by formalizing previously informal sectors (ILO, 2020; African Union, 2019; World Bank, 2023). In Benin, AnpE's programs targeting micro-entrepreneurs and small-scale artisans exemplify this approach, creating opportunities for skills acquisition, business formalization, and financial inclusion. By bridging the gap between informal and formal employment, AnpE contributes not only to individual economic empowerment but also to the development of a more diversified and resilient national economy, where employment policies actively respond to structural labor market realities.

Resource limitations for public employment services represent another persistent challenge, as highlighted in both regional and international literature. Public employment agencies in developing countries often operate with constrained budgets that restrict their

geographic reach and programmatic capacity. In many regions, rural and peri-urban populations have limited access to employment services due to poor infrastructure, lack of information, and administrative barriers (African Union, 2019). To mitigate these limitations, research recommends the strategic use of partnerships with private sector organizations, civil society, and development agencies, allowing employment services to leverage additional funding, technical expertise, and delivery platforms. In Benin, AnpE has operationalized this approach through collaboration with local governments, international donors, and NGOs, thereby pooling resources to extend employment programs into underserved communities (AnpE, 2021). These partnerships enhance both the reach and the quality of services, demonstrating that multi-stakeholder collaboration is crucial for overcoming systemic challenges in public employment provision.

Moreover, supportive national policies play a critical role in amplifying the effectiveness of employment agencies like AnpE. The legal and regulatory framework governing labor markets, vocational training, and entrepreneurship provides the structural backbone for program implementation (Gouvernement de la République du Bénin, 2015). Policies that prioritize youth employment, incentivize the formalization of small enterprises, and promote private sector engagement create an enabling environment in which employment agencies can operate more effectively. International evidence suggests that employment programs are most successful when embedded within a comprehensive policy ecosystem that combines labor market regulation, social protection, and skills development initiatives (ILO, 2020). AnpE's alignment with these principles demonstrates a strategic integration of local needs and international best practices, allowing the agency to address both the supply and demand sides of Benin's labor market.

In sum, the literature on public employment services in Africa, combined with global insights from international labor organizations, provides a comprehensive framework for understanding the role of agencies like AnpE in implementing national employment policies. Employment agencies serve as vital intermediaries between job seekers and employment opportunities, and their impact is magnified by supportive government policies, multi-stakeholder partnerships, and targeted interventions that address the realities of informal economies. By offering vocational and entrepreneurial training, facilitating job matching, and supporting the formalization of informal work, AnpE contributes to poverty reduction, workforce development, and broader economic growth objectives. The agency's work exemplifies the need for integrated, adaptable, and sustainable employment strategies that respond to both immediate labor market challenges and long-term structural changes. As Sub-Saharan Africa continues to confront high youth unemployment and

labor market informality, AnpE's approach highlights the potential of well-coordinated public employment services to drive inclusive economic development, reinforce social protection, and strengthen the resilience of national labor markets.

Ultimately, AnpE's experience underscores the broader lesson that effective employment policy implementation requires not only institutional capacity and funding but also innovative approaches that bridge informal and formal employment, leverage partnerships, and align with both national priorities and international labor standards. Through this multi-dimensional strategy, employment agencies in Benin and across the region can play a transformative role in shaping the future of work, empowering youth, and fostering sustainable economic growth.

This study employs a qualitative research design to examine the performance of the National Employment Agency (AnpE) in implementing Benin's National Employment Policy, with a focus on understanding achievements, challenges, and areas for improvement (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Data were collected through a combination of document analysis and semi-structured interviews. The primary documents included AnpE's 2020 Annual Activity Report, which provides detailed information on program execution, budget allocations, and outcomes. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with key stakeholders, including AnpE officials, local employers, and job seekers, offering contextual insights into the agency's operations (Bryman, 2016). Data analysis involved thematic coding of reports and interview transcripts to identify patterns related to resource allocation, program effectiveness, operational challenges, and stakeholder perceptions (Guest, MacQueen, & Namey, 2012). Findings are presented in relation to AnpE's strategic objectives, highlighting strengths, limitations, and opportunities for policy refinement (World Bank, 2020; ILO, 2021).

METHODS AND MATERIALS

This study employs a qualitative research design to examine the performance of the National Employment Agency (AnpE) in implementing Benin's National Employment Policy, with a particular focus on 2020, a year marked by COVID-19-related disruptions to employment services (Creswell & Poth, 2018; ILO, 2021). Qualitative methods were chosen to provide an in-depth understanding of AnpE's achievements, operational challenges, and areas for improvement. Data were collected through two primary sources. First, AnpE's 2020 Annual Activity Report was analyzed to obtain detailed information on program execution, resource allocation, and documented outcomes. Second, semi-structured interviews were conducted with a purposive sample of key stakeholders, including AnpE officials, local employers, and job seekers who regularly interact with the agency. This combination of document

review and stakeholder interviews allowed for triangulation, providing both objective data and rich contextual insights (Bryman, 2016). Data analysis followed a thematic approach, with coding of both report content and interview transcripts to identify recurring patterns and insights related to operational performance, resource management, program outcomes, and stakeholder perceptions (Guest *et al.*, 2012). Themes were then mapped against AnpE's strategic goals to evaluate the agency's effectiveness and identify areas requiring policy or operational adjustment. This methodology enabled a comprehensive assessment of AnpE's role in advancing employment policy while accounting for the challenges posed by external factors and resource limitations (World Bank, 2020).

FINDINGS

Resource Allocation and Budgetary Performance

The budget mobilization performance of the National Employment Agency (AnpE) in 2020 reveals both relative institutional resilience and significant structural vulnerability. With a mobilization rate of approximately 77%, corresponding to 1.55 billion CFA francs secured out of a planned 1.87 billion CFA francs, AnpE demonstrated a moderate capacity to attract and utilize financial resources under constrained national and global economic conditions (AnpE, 2021). While this figure may appear commendable in isolation, particularly in a year marked by fiscal pressure and uncertainty, it nonetheless signals a critical shortfall that materially undermined the agency's operational effectiveness. The unmobilized 23% of the planned budget represents not merely an accounting deficit, but a tangible loss in potential employment interventions, training cycles, and support services for vulnerable job seekers.

Budgetary insufficiency had a cascading effect on AnpE's core mandate of employment promotion and labor market integration. Employment support programs are inherently resource-intensive, requiring sustained investment in human capital development, monitoring mechanisms, and decentralized outreach. The partial mobilization of funds constrained the agency's ability to scale programs, maintain continuity, and respond adaptively to labor market shocks. This limitation underscores a structural dependency on public financing and external support, raising critical questions about the long-term financial sustainability and autonomy of national employment institutions in developing economies.

These fiscal constraints were further compounded by the unprecedented disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Public health restrictions significantly curtailed AnpE's traditional in-person service delivery model, which is central to its effectiveness. According to the International Labour Organization (ILO, 2021), employment services worldwide faced severe operational challenges during the pandemic, and AnpE was no exception. Lockdowns,

social distancing measures, and mobility restrictions led to the suspension or downsizing of face-to-face training sessions, community-based networking activities, and skills development workshops. These components are particularly critical in contexts where digital literacy and access to online platforms remain limited among job seekers.

The pandemic exposed a critical institutional weakness: insufficient digital preparedness. While many employment agencies globally accelerated their transition toward digital service delivery, AnpE's limited technological infrastructure and budgetary flexibility constrained its ability to fully pivot to remote or hybrid models. As a result, the program's reach diminished precisely at a time when unemployment risks were escalating. This mismatch between growing labor market demand and declining institutional capacity exacerbated employment precarity, especially among youth, women, and informal sector workers.

Programs such as the Independent Employment Support Program (PAEI) and the Partnerships for Decentralized Employment (PaDE) were disproportionately affected by these compounded challenges. Both initiatives rely heavily on physical presence for project identification, beneficiary mentoring, local stakeholder engagement, and monitoring. The below-target physical and financial execution rates recorded in 2020 reflect not only the immediate effects of the pandemic, but also deeper structural inefficiencies in program design. The heavy reliance on centralized funding flows and physical implementation mechanisms rendered these programs less resilient to external shocks.

From a critical standpoint, while the pandemic provides a compelling explanatory context, it should not obscure pre-existing institutional weaknesses. The crisis merely amplified longstanding issues related to funding volatility, limited diversification of financing sources, and insufficient investment in innovation. In our view, AnpE's experience in 2020 highlights the urgent need for a strategic reorientation toward more resilient, digitally enabled, and financially diversified employment support systems. Greater emphasis should be placed on public-private partnerships, decentralized financing models, and adaptive program frameworks capable of functioning under crisis conditions.

In short, the 2020 budget mobilization and execution challenges faced by AnpE reflect a complex interplay of fiscal constraints, institutional rigidity, and external shocks. While the agency demonstrated partial resilience, the experience underscores the necessity for structural reforms aimed at enhancing financial sustainability, digital readiness, and programmatic flexibility. Without such reforms, employment agencies risk remaining reactive rather than transformative actors in national employment ecosystems.

Training and Skills Development Programs

The Requalification and Retraining for Employment (P2RDE) program was designed as a strategic intervention to improve the employability and competitiveness of job seekers, particularly in contexts marked by high youth unemployment and skills mismatches. In principle, the program aligned well with labor market needs by emphasizing reskilling, upskilling, and workforce adaptability. However, in practice, its implementation remained limited and uneven. According to the World Bank (2020), the program achieved only partial execution, largely as a result of budgetary constraints and the disruptive effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. These limitations significantly reduced the program's capacity to reach its intended beneficiaries and to generate sustained employment outcomes.

From an analytical perspective, the partial execution of P2RDE reflects deeper structural weaknesses in program design and public sector implementation. While external shocks such as the pandemic undeniably constrained fiscal space and operational capacity, they also exposed the lack of built-in resilience mechanisms within employment programs. The absence of contingency funding, flexible delivery models (such as digital or blended training), and strong partnerships with private-sector employers reduced the program's ability to adapt to crisis conditions. As a result, P2RDE functioned more as a short-term intervention rather than as a transformative labor market instrument capable of absorbing shocks and maintaining continuity.

In contrast, targeted initiatives such as the Special Pre-Integration Program in Education (PSPIE) demonstrated relatively high physical execution rates. This suggests that when programs are narrowly focused, institutionally anchored, and operationally well-defined, implementation efficiency can be achieved even under constrained conditions. However, as highlighted by the African Development Bank (2021), strong physical execution did not translate into commensurate financial execution. Budget absorption rates remained below expectations, indicating inefficiencies in financial planning, delayed disbursements, or overly rigid public financial management systems. This disconnect between physical outputs and financial execution raises critical questions about the effectiveness, sustainability, and scalability of such programs.

Critically, low financial execution is not merely a technical issue; it has substantive implications for program quality and long-term impact. Insufficient funding limits the depth of training, the quality of instructional materials, the remuneration of trainers, and the availability of modern equipment, particularly in education and vocational training sectors where practical exposure is essential. Moreover, underfunding undermines monitoring and evaluation systems, making it difficult to assess real employment outcomes, such as

job placement, income growth, or career progression. Without robust evidence of impact, these programs risk becoming symbolic policy responses rather than engines of structural change.

From a personal and scholarly standpoint, the experiences of P2RDE and PSPIE underscore the urgent need to rethink how employment and training programs are prioritized and financed. First, education and vocational training should be treated as productive investments rather than recurrent expenditures subject to budget cuts during crises. Second, funding models must be diversified through stronger engagement with development partners, the private sector, and innovative financing mechanisms. Third, greater emphasis should be placed on aligning training content with labor market demand, particularly in emerging sectors, to ensure that financial resources translate into tangible employment outcomes.

In a nutshell, while programs such as P2RDE and PSPIE demonstrate a clear policy commitment to employment and skills development, their limited financial execution and partial implementation reveal systemic weaknesses that constrain their effectiveness. Addressing these challenges requires not only increased funding but also improved governance, flexibility, and strategic prioritization of education and vocational training as core drivers of inclusive economic growth. Without such reforms, well-intentioned programs will continue to fall short of their transformative potential.

Program Execution Rates and Outcomes

The analysis of AnpE's program execution rates reveals significant disparities in both physical and financial performance, underscoring structural, contextual, and strategic challenges in the delivery of employment services. These variations are not merely technical inefficiencies; rather, they reflect deeper institutional vulnerabilities, external shocks, and limitations in program design and adaptability. A closer examination of the PAEI, P2RDE, and PAPCO programs highlights how financial execution gaps, operational rigidity, and dependence on traditional delivery models constrained AnpE's effectiveness, particularly in times of crisis.

The PAEI program recorded a relatively high physical execution rate of 59.10%, indicating that a substantial portion of planned activities was implemented on the ground. However, its financial execution rate lagged significantly at 43.23%, suggesting inefficiencies in budget utilization and possible bottlenecks in fund disbursement (AnpE, 2021). This mismatch raises critical concerns about planning coherence and financial management capacity. From a research perspective, strong physical execution without corresponding financial absorption often signals delayed procurement processes, administrative rigidities, or inadequate alignment between program design and fiscal

realities. In my view, this imbalance also reflects a cautious or reactive financial governance culture, where funds are either underutilized due to fear of mismanagement or constrained by overly centralized approval mechanisms. While fiscal prudence is important, excessive rigidity can undermine program impact, especially in labor market interventions where timing is crucial for job seekers.

The situation is even more concerning in the case of the P2RDE program, which achieved a financial execution rate of only 6.26%. This extremely low rate reflects the severe disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly the restrictions on physical training and in-person capacity-building activities (ILO, 2021). However, while the pandemic undeniably constituted an external shock, the near paralysis of the program exposes a lack of contingency planning and limited digital readiness. International labor market research increasingly emphasizes the importance of hybrid and digital training models, especially for youth employment programs in volatile contexts. In my assessment, P2RDE's failure was not solely due to COVID-19 but also to an overreliance on traditional training modalities and insufficient investment in alternative delivery mechanisms such as online learning, mobile-based training, or decentralized community platforms. This rigidity disproportionately affected young job seekers, who lost critical opportunities to develop employability skills at a time when labor market entry was already becoming more competitive.

The PAPCO program presents a more nuanced case. With a physical execution rate of 61.47%, it demonstrated moderate operational resilience compared to P2RDE. Nonetheless, its effectiveness was undermined by declining participant engagement, largely due to its dependence on face-to-face interactions. This finding aligns with broader evidence that employment orientation and counseling services require adaptability to maintain engagement, particularly among youth populations whose participation is sensitive to accessibility and perceived relevance (ILO, 2020). From a critical standpoint, PAPCO's design appears insufficiently responsive to changing behavioral patterns and expectations among young people, especially in contexts marked by mobility restrictions and health concerns. In our opinion, the program missed an opportunity to integrate digital career guidance tools and remote counseling approaches that could have sustained engagement while expanding reach.

Collectively, these execution variances illustrate the profound influence of external factors, most notably the COVID-19 crisis, on program outcomes. However, they also expose internal systemic weaknesses within AnpE, including limited institutional flexibility, weak crisis preparedness, and a slow pace of innovation. While external shocks cannot be fully controlled, their impacts can be mitigated through resilient strategies,

diversified delivery channels, and adaptive financial management systems. We strongly argue that AnpE must move beyond reactive adjustments and adopt a proactive transformation agenda, emphasizing digitalization, decentralized implementation, and results-based financing. Such reforms are essential not only to improve execution rates but also to enhance the relevance, inclusiveness, and sustainability of employment services in an increasingly uncertain labor market environment.

In sum, the observed program performance outcomes should be interpreted as a call for institutional learning rather than isolated failures. Strengthening AnpE's strategic agility and implementation capacity is critical to ensuring that employment programs can withstand future shocks while effectively supporting youth employability and labor market integration.

Implementation Challenges

The effective implementation of Benin's National Employment Policy by the Agence nationale pour l'Emploi (AnpE) has been significantly constrained by a combination of structural, financial, and contextual challenges. While AnpE plays a strategic role in coordinating employment promotion initiatives, the findings reveal that systemic limitations have weakened its operational capacity and reduced the overall impact of policy outcomes, particularly among vulnerable populations such as youth and rural job seekers.

One of the most critical challenges identified is funding constraints, which continue to undermine AnpE's institutional autonomy and programmatic sustainability. The agency's heavy reliance on government budget allocations and external donor funding has resulted in limited financial flexibility and long-term planning capacity. As noted by the African Union Commission and International Labour Organization (2019), only partial resource mobilization was achieved, meaning that planned activities often had to be scaled down or delayed. This dependency exposes AnpE to fiscal instability, especially in periods of national budget tightening or shifting donor priorities. From an analytical standpoint, this funding model reflects a broader structural weakness common to public employment agencies in developing economies, where employment policies are ambitious in design but inadequately resourced in practice. In my view, without a deliberate shift toward diversified funding strategies, such as public-private partnerships, employer contributions, and performance-based financing, AnpE risks remaining reactive rather than proactive in addressing labor market challenges.

The COVID-19 pandemic further exacerbated these financial and operational vulnerabilities. According to the World Bank (2023b), the pandemic disrupted labor market institutions worldwide, and AnpE was no exception. Programs that relied heavily on face-to-face engagement, such as the Programme d'Appui à

l'Emploi Indépendant (PAEI) and the Programme d'Appui aux Populations à Capacité Organisationnelle (PAPCO), were postponed or canceled due to public health restrictions. This disruption not only delayed service delivery but also weakened trust among beneficiaries who depended on timely training, orientation, and placement services. Critically, the pandemic exposed AnpE's limited preparedness for crisis-responsive service delivery. While COVID-19 was an unprecedented shock, the inability to rapidly transition to alternative delivery mechanisms suggests deeper institutional rigidity. From a personal analytical perspective, this highlights the urgent need for resilience planning within employment agencies, including contingency frameworks that allow programs to continue under restrictive conditions.

Another significant limitation concerns operational challenges in remote and underserved areas, particularly rural regions with weak digital and physical infrastructure. As emphasized by UNDP (2021), digital inequality remains a major barrier to inclusive employment service delivery in many developing countries. AnpE's difficulty in reaching rural job seekers reflects not only infrastructural deficits but also an urban-centered service model that inadequately accounts for spatial inequalities. Limited internet access, insufficient digital literacy, and weak local outreach mechanisms have reduced the agency's ability to provide consistent training, labor market information, and employment matching services in these areas. This situation is particularly problematic given that rural populations often face higher levels of underemployment and informality. In my assessment, the persistence of these gaps risks reinforcing existing socio-economic disparities, thereby contradicting the inclusive objectives of the National Employment Policy.

Collectively, these findings underscore the necessity of institutional innovation and strategic reform. Diversifying funding sources would enhance AnpE's financial resilience, while investments in digital platforms and mobile service delivery could expand reach and continuity, even during crises. However, technology alone is not a panacea. Digital tools must be complemented by capacity-building initiatives, local partnerships, and policy coherence across sectors such as education, infrastructure, and private enterprise development. Ultimately, strengthening AnpE's effectiveness requires not only technical solutions but also strong political commitment to employment as a core pillar of national development.

DISCUSSION OF THE FINDINGS

The findings of this study indicate that the National Employment Agency (Agence nationale pour l'Emploi [AnpE]) has played a strategically important role in advancing the implementation of Benin's National Employment Policy. Despite operating within a constrained institutional, financial, and socio-economic

environment, AnpE has demonstrated measurable progress in promoting employment creation, employability, and labor market inclusion, particularly through its decentralized and community-oriented interventions. However, the results also reveal structural and operational gaps that limit the sustainability and scale of these achievements (AnpE, 2021). This discussion critically examines AnpE's performance, interprets the implications of the findings, and situates them within broader employment policy and labor market governance perspectives.

One of the most significant strengths identified is AnpE's decentralization strategy, particularly through initiatives such as the *Partenariat Décentralisé pour l'Emploi* (PaDE) (MPMEPE, 2020). The findings show that decentralization has enhanced local ownership of employment initiatives and improved the responsiveness of programs to community-specific labor market realities. By collaborating directly with municipal and local authorities, AnpE has been able to align national employment objectives with local development priorities. This approach reflects contemporary public policy theories that emphasize subsidiarity, local governance, and place-based development as effective mechanisms for addressing unemployment, especially in heterogeneous socio-economic contexts such as Benin.

The positive outcomes observed in communities benefiting from PaDE suggest that decentralized employment governance enables more efficient allocation of resources, quicker decision-making, and better targeting of beneficiaries. Local governments, being closer to the population, are better positioned to identify priority sectors, vulnerable groups, and viable income-generating activities. Consequently, AnpE's decentralized model contributes not only to employment creation but also to social inclusion and territorial equity. These findings reinforce existing research that highlights decentralization as a catalyst for employment effectiveness in developing economies, where centralized systems often struggle to address localized labor market disparities.

Nevertheless, the findings also reveal that the impact of decentralization remains uneven and constrained by broader systemic challenges. While PaDE recorded high physical execution rates, its broader effectiveness has been limited by insufficient financial resources and uneven implementation capacity across municipalities. This suggests that decentralization alone is not sufficient; it must be accompanied by adequate fiscal transfers, capacity building for local actors, and strong coordination mechanisms between national and local institutions. Without these complementary measures, decentralized employment initiatives risk producing fragmented and short-term outcomes rather than sustained labor market transformation.

A critical weakness identified in the findings concerns AnpE's limited engagement with the private sector. Although AnpE implements several employability and training programs, including the *Perfectionnement, Reconversion et Requalification des Demandeurs d'Emploi* (P2RDE), collaboration with private employers remains largely informal and insufficiently institutionalized. This gap undermines the alignment between training supply and labor market demand, a recurring challenge in active labor market policies across Sub-Saharan Africa.

From a labor economics perspective, the absence of strong private sector partnerships reduces the likelihood that training interventions translate into actual employment outcomes. Skills development programs that are not co-designed with employers risk producing graduates whose competencies do not match current or emerging market needs. The findings therefore suggest that AnpE's training-based interventions would benefit significantly from structured partnerships with private enterprises, professional associations, and sectoral bodies. Such partnerships could facilitate curriculum co-development, workplace-based training, apprenticeships, and direct job placement pathways, thereby improving the transition from training to employment.

The findings further highlight AnpE's heavy reliance on in-person service delivery as a major institutional vulnerability. During periods of restricted physical interaction, program implementation was significantly disrupted, affecting job seekers' access to training, counseling, and employment services. This experience underscores the agency's limited preparedness for external shocks and reveals a critical gap in its operational model. In an increasingly digital and interconnected labor market, the absence of a robust digital employment service platform constrains AnpE's ability to reach a wider population, particularly youth and job seekers in remote or underserved areas.

The study's results strongly point to the need for a comprehensive digital transformation strategy. Digital employment services, such as online job matching platforms, virtual training modules, remote career counseling, and digital labor market information systems, are now widely recognized as global best practices in employment governance. For AnpE, adopting digital tools would not only enhance continuity during crises but also improve efficiency, data collection, monitoring, and service scalability. Moreover, digitalization could strengthen transparency and accountability while reducing operational costs over the long term.

Financial constraints emerge as another major factor limiting AnpE's effectiveness. The findings show a recurrent discrepancy between physical and financial execution rates across programs. For instance, while the *Programme d'Appui à l'Emploi Indépendant* (PAEI)

achieved a physical execution rate of 59.10%, its financial execution lagged at 43.23%, largely due to pandemic-related disruptions. Similar patterns were observed in PaDE, where strong implementation performance was not matched by sufficient budgetary support. These gaps indicate structural underfunding and highlight the vulnerability of employment programs to external shocks.

From a policy implementation standpoint, inadequate financing undermines program quality, coverage, and sustainability. Employment promotion, particularly in contexts marked by high youth unemployment and informal labor markets, requires long-term investment rather than short-term project-based funding. The findings suggest that increased national budget allocations, coupled with diversified funding sources such as development partners, private sector co-financing, and innovative financing mechanisms, are essential for AnpE to fully realize its mandate.

All in all, the findings demonstrate that AnpE has made commendable progress in implementing Benin's National Employment Policy through decentralized, community-based interventions that enhance local relevance and inclusion. However, the agency's overall impact remains constrained by weak private sector engagement, limited digital capacity, and persistent financial shortfalls. Addressing these structural challenges is essential for transforming AnpE from a primarily program-implementing agency into a resilient, demand-driven, and future-oriented employment institution. Strengthening partnerships, embracing digital innovation, and ensuring sustainable financing would significantly enhance AnpE's capacity to support Benin's workforce and contribute meaningfully to inclusive and sustainable economic growth.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To enhance the operational effectiveness of the National Employment Agency (AnpE) and strengthen the implementation of Benin's National Employment Policy, several strategic recommendations emerge from this study. First, expanding digital infrastructure should be a core institutional priority. Investing in an integrated, agency-wide digital ecosystem would significantly modernize AnpE's service delivery. Digital platforms could support online skills training, virtual career counseling, job-matching systems, and real-time program monitoring and evaluation. Such infrastructure would not only improve efficiency and transparency but also reduce AnpE's reliance on physical offices, thereby lowering operational costs and barriers to access. Importantly, digitalization would enable AnpE to extend services to rural and underserved communities, where unemployment and informality are often most pronounced. By institutionalizing digital tools, AnpE would also strengthen its resilience to future shocks,

ensuring continuity of employment services during health, economic, or security crises.

Second, strengthening interagency coordination and private sector partnerships is essential for labor market relevance. Closer collaboration with key government ministries, such as education, vocational training, youth, and social affairs, would improve policy coherence and reduce program duplication. At the same time, deeper engagement with private sector actors, employers' associations, and non-governmental organizations would allow AnpE to better align its training and placement programs with current and emerging labor market needs. Private sector participation can provide practical insights into skills demand, facilitate apprenticeships and internships, and improve job placement outcomes. Such partnerships would enhance the employability of beneficiaries and ensure that public employment interventions respond directly to economic realities.

Third, employment initiatives should be further localized through the expansion of the Partnerships for Decentralized Employment (PaDE). Evidence suggests that decentralized approaches are more effective in addressing region-specific labor market challenges. By increasing financial, technical, and human resources for PaDE, AnpE could empower local governments to design and implement employment programs tailored to their socio-economic contexts. This localization would encourage community ownership, support local entrepreneurship, and promote sustainable job creation in sectors such as agriculture, crafts, services, and small-scale industries. Strengthened PaDE mechanisms would also improve coordination between national policy objectives and local development priorities.

Finally, AnpE should institutionalize crisis-resilient and flexible training models. The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the vulnerability of traditional, face-to-face employment programs. Developing hybrid training models that combine online learning with in-person practical components would allow AnpE to rapidly adapt to restrictive conditions without interrupting service delivery. Such flexibility would protect beneficiaries, preserve institutional credibility, and ensure the continuity of skills development initiatives during future crises. Altogether, these recommendations would enhance AnpE's resilience, inclusiveness, and effectiveness, reinforcing its role as a central pillar in achieving Benin's National Employment Policy objectives and improving long-term employment outcomes.

CONCLUSION

The National Employment Agency (AnpE) plays a pivotal role in the implementation of Benin's National Employment Policy, with a particular emphasis on youth and other vulnerable populations through targeted programs that promote job creation and skills

development. Although the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 significantly disrupted program delivery, AnpE demonstrated institutional resilience and adaptability by sustaining and, in some cases, strengthening key employment initiatives. This experience underscored the agency's capacity not only to facilitate employment but also to recalibrate its strategies in response to rapidly changing economic conditions. Looking ahead, AnpE could enhance its effectiveness by further expanding its digital infrastructure to ensure wider geographic coverage, improve service accessibility, and increase resilience to future disruptions. In addition, deepening collaboration with government institutions, private sector actors, and non-governmental organizations would strengthen the agency's resource base and enable the development of more diversified, market-responsive, and sustainable employment programs.

In a nutshell, this case study illustrates the potential of national employment agencies to contribute meaningfully to economic growth and workforce development in developing contexts when supported by adaptive, multi-stakeholder approaches. With continued investment in digital integration, strengthened public-private partnerships, and flexible program models, AnpE is well positioned to expand its impact on employment generation and economic stability in Benin. Its experience offers valuable lessons for similar institutions across Sub-Saharan Africa seeking to align local labor market needs with broader regional and global workforce trends.

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