

YOUTH UNEMPLOYMENT IN MEGHALAYA: CHALLENGES AND POLICY RESPONSES

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Abstract: Meghalaya has been grappling with unemployment problem for the last few decades and the problem seems to get worse by the day. Youth unemployment in Meghalaya has emerged as one of the most pressing socio-economic concerns of the state. With youth (15–29 years) constituting over 30% of the population and accounting for nearly 85% of the unemployed, the problem reflects both structural and systemic gaps in the labor market. Despite a high labor force participation rate, employment absorption remains inadequate due to skill mismatches, limited industrial diversification, and an overdependence on government employment. The challenges are compounded by a weak education–employment linkage, dominance of the informal sector, and rapid demographic pressures. High levels of youth unemployment not only perpetuate poverty and inequality but also risk triggering social instability, mental health issues, and social evils. This paper critically examines these challenges while also exploring recent policy responses, including State Government initiatives such as FOCUS, PRIME, CM Elevate, YESS Meghalaya, and the Meghalaya Grassroots Music Project, which aim to promote entrepreneurship, skill development, and livelihood diversification. It argues that while these programs represent important steps, a more integrated strategy, linking

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education reform, infrastructure expansion, and inclusive economic diversification, is required to transform Meghalaya's youthful demographic dividend into a driver of sustainable growth.

Keywords: Youth unemployment, Meghalaya, labor force, entrepreneurship, policy responses.

Introduction

Youth unemployment is a growing concern in Meghalaya, where young people aged 15-29 make up nearly one-third of the population. According to the Meghalaya Youth Policy 2021 and the Periodic Labor Force Survey (PLFS) 2022–23, over 85% of the state's unemployed are youth, with the overall unemployment rate at 6% and urban unemployment reaching 12.3% which is more than double the national average. Despite a high Labor Force Participation Rate (LFPR) of nearly 70%, job creation has lagged behind, leaving many young people without adequate opportunities. The challenges are structural as well as numerical: skill mismatches, limited industrial diversification, an overdependence on government jobs, and weak private sector growth continue to constrain employment prospects. The consequences include poverty, social discontent, and migration of skilled workers. While initiatives such as Farmers' Collectivization for Upscaling Production and Marketing Systems (FOCUS), Promotion and Incubation of Market-Driven Enterprises (PRIME), Chief Minister Elevate Program (CM Elevate), and Youth Engagement through Empowered Youth Organizations Scheme (YESS Meghalaya) show promise in promoting entrepreneurship, skill development, and livelihood diversification, the state still faces the urgent task of aligning education, training, and economic policy to harness its demographic dividend.

Basic Definitions of Employment, Unemployment and Underemployment

According to the ILO, employment refers to all persons of working age who, during a short reference period, were engaged in any activity to produce goods or provide services for pay or profit. This definition includes both those “*at work*” (having worked at least one hour during the reference period) and those “*not at work*” but temporarily absent due to illness, vacation, or other reasons, provided they have a formal job attachment. Unemployment, on the other hand, applies to persons of working age who are not in employment, are available for work, and have actively sought work in a recent period (usually four weeks). Individuals who have already secured a job that will begin shortly

are also considered unemployed, whereas discouraged workers who have stopped seeking work are excluded (ILO, 2013).

The key elements of employment, as outlined by the International Labor Organization (ILO), include specific criteria that distinguish employed individuals from the broader working age population. *First*, employment is restricted to the working age population, typically defined as individuals aged 15 years and above (ILO, 2013). *Second*, employment is assessed over a reference period, usually a short span such as one week, during which the individual's economic activity is evaluated. *Third*, the concept emphasizes engagement in productive activities, specifically the production of goods or the provision of services for pay or profit. *Finally*, employment status includes both those who are currently working and those who are temporarily absent from their jobs but retain a formal attachment to them, for example due to illness, vacation, or other leave arrangements (ILO, 2013).

In contrast, the key elements of unemployment consist of three essential conditions. *First*, an unemployed individual must be without employment, meaning they are not engaged in any productive activity during the reference period. *Second*, the individual must demonstrate availability for work, signifying readiness to accept employment within a short time frame, usually two weeks. *Third*, the person must be engaged in an active search for employment, taking specific steps to secure a job in the recent past, generally within the preceding four weeks. These elements form the international standard definition of unemployment, ensuring comparability across countries and contexts (ILO, 2013).

Beyond open unemployment, many individuals experience underemployment, where their current employment does not align with their skills, education, or potential. Underemployment can be classified into two forms: visible underemployment, which is evident in part-time or low-productivity jobs, and invisible underemployment, where individuals may be engaged full-time but at tasks below their level of qualification or capacity (ILO, 2013).

In analyzing labor market dynamics, it is essential to distinguish between labor supply, labor force, and workforce. Labor supply refers to the total amount of labor offered at different wage rates, often measured in man-days (with one man-day equivalent to eight hours of work). The labor force encompasses all individuals who are either employed or actively seeking employment, irrespective of wage rates. The workforce, however, is restricted

to those persons who are actually employed at a given time (NSSO, 2014, p. 11).

Types and Causes of Unemployment

Unemployment is a multifaceted phenomenon that can be broadly classified into voluntary and involuntary categories. Voluntary unemployment occurs when individuals who are capable of work choose not to participate in the labor market or refuse available employment opportunities. In contrast, involuntary unemployment arises when individuals are both willing and able to work but cannot secure suitable employment due to structural or economic constraints.

Several distinct forms of involuntary unemployment have been recognized in economic literature. Structural unemployment results from imbalances in the economy, such as rapid population growth, inadequate capital formation, technological changes, or mismatches between the skills of workers and the needs of employers. Disguised unemployment occurs when surplus labor contributes little or nothing to productivity, commonly observed in agriculture where the withdrawal of certain workers does not reduce total output. Frictional unemployment is temporary and arises during job transitions, labor mobility, strikes, or layoffs, reflecting imperfections in labor market adjustment. Cyclical unemployment is linked to fluctuations in the business cycle, especially during recessions when aggregate demand for goods and services declines. Chronic unemployment is persistent and often associated with underutilization of resources, structural poverty, and reliance on outdated production methods. Technological unemployment emerges from innovations and labor-saving devices that displace workers. Casual unemployment occurs in sectors such as agriculture and construction where work is based on daily or short-term contracts, leaving workers vulnerable to demand fluctuations. Seasonal unemployment is found in sectors such as agriculture and tourism where employment opportunities are confined to specific times of the year.

Unemployment and Methods of Measuring Unemployment in India

The causes of unemployment in developing economies such as India are multifaceted. They include slow economic growth, population explosion, an inadequate and irrelevant education system, a mismatch between the skills required by industries and those available among job seekers, and the limited effectiveness of government planning and policy implementation. These structural weaknesses hinder the absorption of labor into productive sectors and exacerbate unemployment levels. Following the recommendations of the

Prof. M. L. Dantwala Committee (1960), the National Sample Survey Office (NSSO) adopted three principal measures of unemployment viz., Usual Principal Status (UPS), Current Weekly Status (CWS), and Current Daily Status (CDS) (Roy, Mehta, Giri, & Mukhopadhyay, 2008).

Usual Principal Status (UPS): UPS method measures unemployment over a one-year period before the survey. Under this method, a person is considered employed if they were engaged in any economic activity for the majority of the year (more than 183 days), regardless of how many hours they actually worked on those days. Conversely, a person is counted as unemployed only if they were without work for more than 183 days. Because UPS focuses on long term or predominant activity rather than short term work patterns, it generally produces the lowest unemployment estimates compared to Current Weekly Status (CWS) and Current Daily Status (CDS).

Current Weekly Status (CWS): This uses a reference period of one week before the survey. A person is counted as employed if they have worked for at least one hour during that week. A person is considered unemployed if they did not work at all during the week but were actively seeking work and available for employment. Because this method captures people who were temporarily unemployed during the week, it usually produces higher unemployment estimates than Usual Principal Status (UPS).

Current Daily Status (CDS): This method measures employment on a day-to-day basis. Individuals are classified as fully employed if they worked at least 4 hours on the day before the survey, half-day employed if they worked 1 to 4 hours, and unemployed if they worked less than 1 hour and were available for work. This method provides the most detailed measurement and generally shows the highest unemployment rates, because it captures intermittent work, partial-day employment, and short-term unemployment that UPS and CWS may miss.

The unemployment rate in India is measured as the ratio of the number of unemployed individuals to the total labor force, expressed as a percentage. This approach follows the standard methodology adopted in labor force surveys, where the labor force comprises both the employed and the unemployed population actively seeking work (MoSPI, 2023). The following is the formula use for calculating unemployment rate in India:

$$\text{Unemployment Rate} = (\text{Number of Unemployed Individuals} / \text{Total Labor Force}) \times 100$$

Example: Let's say, India has 10 million unemployed people and a total labor force of 500 million;

Then, the *Unemployment Rate* would be: $(10,000,000 / 500,000,000) * 100 = 2\%$.

Youth Unemployment in Meghalaya

Meghalaya's demographic structure highlights a youthful population, which represents both a potential demographic dividend and a developmental challenge. According to the *Meghalaya Youth Policy* (2021), youth are defined as individuals aged 15–29 years, accounting for more than 1.1 million people or approximately 30.6 percent of the state's total population. This large youth cohort, if productively engaged, could become a key driver of the state's economic growth. However, youth unemployment has emerged as a critical concern in recent years. As per the survey (PLFS, 2022–23), nearly 85 percent of the state's unemployed fall within the 15–30 age group, while the overall unemployment rate stands at 6.0 percent of the labor force. The total labor force in Meghalaya i.e., comprising individuals either employed or actively seeking employment is estimated at 1.248 million (Government of Meghalaya, 2021). Meghalaya's Labor Force Participation Rate (LFPR) has consistently exceeded 60 percent over the years and reached 69.8 percent in 2022–23, significantly higher than the national average (MoSPI, 2023). This suggests that a large proportion of the working-age population, including women, is actively participating in the labor market.

Despite the high level of participation, the absorption of labor into productive and remunerative employment remains insufficient. A combination of structural and institutional factors contributes to this situation. The limited presence of large-scale industries, the predominance of the informal sector, and the scarcity of technical and vocational skills among youth have constrained employment creation in the state. Moreover, a mismatch between the education system and the requirements of the labor market further exacerbates the problem. Many educated young people find themselves inadequately equipped for the few available jobs, leading to a growing phenomenon of educated unemployment. Additionally, Meghalaya's economic base remains heavily dependent on the primary sector, particularly agriculture, which is largely subsistence-oriented and unable to absorb the increasing number of young entrants into the labor force. The secondary and tertiary sectors, though expanding, have yet to generate sufficient employment opportunities to match the growing supply of educated youth. The situation is further compounded by slow private sector investment, infrastructural

bottlenecks, and limited entrepreneurship support systems, which discourage self-employment ventures among young people.

In this context, addressing youth unemployment in Meghalaya requires a comprehensive approach that integrates education reform, skill development, and the promotion of small and medium enterprises (SMEs). Strengthening vocational training institutions, aligning curricula with emerging market needs, and encouraging entrepreneurship through credit facilitation and mentorship can enhance youth employability. The challenge for policymakers is not merely to create jobs, but to ensure that the jobs created are sustainable, productive, and aligned with the aspirations and capabilities of the state's young population.

Employment statistics in Meghalaya follow national methodology through the PLFS, which reports indicators such as the Unemployment Rate (UR), Labor Force Participation Rate and Worker Population Ratio (WPR) (MoSPI, 2023, p. 2). Additional sources include state-level surveys, jobless claims, and census data. Meghalaya's UR is 6.0 percent, with urban unemployment reaching 12.3 percent, more than double the national urban average of 5.4 percent (MoSPI, 2023, p. 5).

Causes of Unemployment in Meghalaya

Unemployment in Meghalaya is a multifaceted challenge shaped by structural, demographic, and socio-economic factors. The issue is particularly acute among the youth, who constitute a large proportion of the labor force but face persistent barriers to securing productive employment. A detailed analysis of the underlying causes is presented below.

1. Skill Mismatch and Gaps: One of the most pressing causes of unemployment in Meghalaya is the lack of alignment between the skills possessed by job seekers and those demanded by employers. Many young people graduate with degrees that are not market-relevant, while technical and vocational training opportunities remain limited. The Government of Meghalaya (2021, p. 8) notes that inadequate exposure to industry-relevant skills significantly reduces employability. This mismatch has also constrained the private sector's ability to absorb local youth into emerging industries such as IT services, healthcare, and tourism.

2. Education–Employment Disconnect: The state's education system, though expanding in coverage, often fails to prepare students for the realities of the labor market. Curricula emphasize theoretical knowledge over practical training, leaving graduates unprepared for jobs in skilled trades, manufacturing, and service industries. The disconnect between academic qualifications and actual

industry requirements creates a pool of educated but unemployed youth, a phenomenon reflected in high educated unemployment rates across the North East.

3. Limited Industrial Diversification: Meghalaya's economy is heavily dependent on agriculture, which continues to employ a large share of the population despite its low productivity. Non-farm sectors such as manufacturing, agro-processing, and services remain underdeveloped. This lack of industrial diversification reduces the economy's capacity to generate employment opportunities outside agriculture. Furthermore, sectors with high employment potential such as tourism, information technology, and logistics have not been fully developed due to infrastructural bottlenecks and limited investment (Government of Meghalaya, 2021).

4. Preference for Government Employment: There exists a cultural and historical preference for secure government jobs among the people of Meghalaya. This preference has created an imbalance in labor market aspirations, with many young people queuing for limited government posts while opportunities in the private sector remain underexplored. The saturation of the public sector, combined with limited openings, results in widespread unemployment among aspirants, many of whom remain unwilling to pursue entrepreneurial or informal sector opportunities (Meghalaya Youth Policy, 2021).

5. Economic Fluctuations and Structural Weaknesses: Meghalaya's economy is vulnerable to fluctuations in agricultural productivity, monsoon variations, and shifts in demand for natural resources such as coal and limestone. Periods of slow economic growth directly reduce job creation, disproportionately affecting first-time job seekers. Structural weaknesses such as slow capital formation and limited private investment further constrain the pace of employment generation (MoSPI, 2023).

6. Dominance of the Informal Economy: A large share of employment in Meghalaya is generated within the informal sector, which is characterized by low wages, job insecurity, and lack of social protection. While the informal sector provides livelihoods, it does not ensure stable or dignified employment, leaving many workers underemployed. For youth, this dominance of informal work often discourages participation or results in precarious livelihoods that do not match their qualifications (PLFS, 2022–23).

7. Population Pressure: Demographic factors also contribute to rising unemployment. With over 30 percent of Meghalaya's population falling within the youth category, the labor force grows rapidly each year. However,

job creation has not kept pace with this demographic expansion, resulting in intense competition for limited opportunities.

8. Technological Displacement: Although not yet as pronounced as in industrialized regions, the gradual adoption of mechanization and technology in sectors such as agriculture, mining, and services is beginning to reduce demand for low-skilled labor. Without adequate reskilling programs, many workers risk being displaced by automation and technological change (Government of Meghalaya, 2021).

9. Infrastructural Constraints: Poor transport connectivity, inadequate industrial infrastructure, and weak digital penetration limit economic activity and employment opportunities. For example, the lack of reliable logistics has discouraged investment in manufacturing and agro-processing, sectors that could otherwise absorb large numbers of youth.

Employment and Livelihood Initiatives under the Meghalaya Democratic Alliance (MDA) Government in Meghalaya

The Government of Meghalaya under the MDA has made several attempts to tackle the challenge of unemployment through a range of employment and livelihood initiatives. These programs are designed to expand opportunities beyond the limited scope of public sector jobs by supporting agriculture, entrepreneurship, creative industries, and skill-based ventures. Together, they represent a multi-pronged approach aimed at enhancing income generation, encouraging self-employment, and creating pathways for sustainable job creation across the state. Some of these initiatives can be mentioned below.

FOCUS (Farmers' Collectivization for Upscaling Production and Marketing Systems): The FOCUS scheme is a flagship livelihood program of the Government of Meghalaya. It provides working capital of Rs. 5,000 per member of a Producer Group (PG), and facilitates aggregation, market linkages, and access to Agri-value chains such as piggery, poultry, horticulture, and spices (MyMeG – FOCUS Scheme, Celebrating success of FOCUS, 2022). The scheme has benefited approximately 2.45 lakh farmers since its launch (Celebrating success of FOCUS, new scheme FOCUS+, 2022). In June 2025, nearly Rs. 19 crore was disbursed under the scheme to over 4,600 PGs in the Garo Hills (Times of India, 2025). The combined FOCUS and FOCUS+ initiatives have been allocated an annual investment of about Rs. 500 crores, with expectations to channel nearly Rs. 5,000 crores to Meghalaya's farming households over the next decade (Syllad, 2025).

Mission Mode Program on Livelihoods: Another important initiative is the National Rural Livelihood Mission (NRLM), which in Meghalaya is implemented in mission mode through the Meghalaya State Rural Livelihood Society (MSRLS). The program aims “to reduce poverty by enabling the poor households to access gainful self-employment and skilled wage employment opportunities, resulting in improvement in their livelihoods on a sustainable basis” (National Rural Livelihood Mission (NRLM), Government of Meghalaya, Schemes: Community & Rural Development Department, Government of Meghalaya). It works by organizing households into Self-Help Groups (SHGs), building grassroots institutions, and converging agricultural value chains and rural development efforts to scale up livelihood opportunities in rural and semi-urban areas.

Meghalaya Grassroots Music Project (MGMP) / Chief Minister’s Grassroots Music Production (CMGMP): The MGMP (now rebranded as Chief Minister’s Grassroots Music Production) is a cultural-livelihood initiative by the Government of Meghalaya through the Tourism Department, under the heading “MGMP - Meghalaya Tourism” (Government of Meghalaya, MGMP – Meghalaya Tourism; India Today NE, 2025). It began in 2022 by supporting approximately 500 local musicians via platforms such as café gigs and street performances (India Today NE, 2022). As of 2025, under the CMGMP banner, the program has expanded with a budget of Rs. 69 crores, supporting more than 5,400 artists and facilitating over 38,000 live performances, along with creating about 175 salaried roles for crew and coordinators (India Today NE, 2025; Government of Meghalaya, MGMP – Meghalaya Tourism). The project also provides music theory training, tour funding, mentorship, and subsidies for events, helping artists generate alternative income streams and strengthening Meghalaya’s identity as a cultural hub.

MeGLIFE (Project for Community-Based Forest Management & Livelihood Improvement in Meghalaya): The Project for Community-Based Forest Management & Livelihood Improvement in Meghalaya (MegLIFE) is a JICA-assisted initiative implemented by the Meghalaya Basin Development Authority (Government of Meghalaya, MegLIFE). Under this scheme, 125 community centers were inaugurated on 17 June 2025 in the Garo Hills, each built for Rs. 24 lakhs, with Rs. 13 lakhs contributed by the MegLIFE project and Rs. 11 lakhs by the state government, to serve as hubs for eco-sustainable community activities such as nurseries, plantations, minor irrigation, and water storage (Northeast News, 2025). The project targets 500 villages across 12 districts of Meghalaya and plans to establish 452 community centers

statewide (MegLIFE: Meghalaya Basin Development Authority, Government of Meghalaya; Meghalaya Times, 2025).

PRIME - Promotion and Incubation of Market-Driven Enterprises: PRIME is designed to “make entrepreneurship a preferred career choice for the youth through the creation of a dynamic and collaborative ecosystem that enables easy availability of credit, relevant technology, skilling and mentoring support, and access to leverage markets” (Government of Meghalaya, Scheme - PRIME-Promotion and Incubation of Market-Driven Enterprises). As of late 2022, the program has supported 422 start-ups, of which 60% are women-led, and has incubated entrepreneurs in hubs such as Shillong and Tura (The Telegraph India, 2022). These enterprises have collectively created over 3,000 jobs to date, and the government aims to reach 500 start-ups within its first five years.

CM-Elevate Program: The CM-Elevate Program was announced in October 2023 as the state’s flagship entrepreneurship and job-creation initiative. The scheme mobilizes Rs. 300 crores to support 20,000 entrepreneurs over the next five years, with grants or subsidies of up to 75%, and the remaining funding to be raised through bank loans (Government of Meghalaya, CM ELEVATE; The Economic Times, 2023). Covering diverse sectors such as tourism, agriculture, entertainment, and social services, the program is projected to generate 50,000+ jobs in entrepreneurship, positioning it as a key instrument for youth employment given the limited formal government-sector job creation (The Economic Times, 2023).

YESS Meghalaya (Youth Engagement through Empowered Youth Organizations): The program was introduced in 2022 to support youth-driven Organizations by offering financial grants of up to Rs. 1 lakh for awareness campaigns, educational outreach, and other community initiatives (Government of Meghalaya, Hon’ble Chief Minister ... launched YESS Meghalaya program, 2022; India Today NE, 2023). In its first year, the state government supported 1,155 youth organizations under YESS Meghalaya, reflecting a strong commitment to mobilizing youth participation across Meghalaya (India Today NE, 2023).

Discussion and Conclusion

The employment and livelihood initiatives launched by the MDA Government in Meghalaya demonstrate a deliberate attempt to address the state’s long-standing unemployment challenge, particularly among the youth. A notable strength of these programs lies in their multi-sectoral approach, which expands opportunities beyond the narrow scope of government

employment. Initiatives such as FOCUS and the National Rural Livelihood Mission (NRLM) provide a foundation for self-employment and collective livelihood models in the agrarian sector, while programs like PRIME and CM-Elevate encourage entrepreneurship and start-up development. Likewise, the Meghalaya Grassroots Music Project (MGMP) and its upgraded version, the Chief Minister's Grassroots Music Production (CMGMP), strategically tap into Meghalaya's cultural capital by transforming creative talent into an economic resource. Such diversification of opportunities is particularly significant in a state with limited formal employment avenues.

Another positive dimension is the emphasis on inclusivity and youth participation. Several schemes are directly targeted at young people, encouraging them to consider entrepreneurship and skill-based ventures as viable career paths. PRIME has reported that over 60 per cent of its supported start-ups are women-led, indicating an effort to empower women entrepreneurs in the state. Similarly, YESS Meghalaya mobilizes youth organizations for community-oriented initiatives, while MegLIFE fosters eco-sustainable livelihood practices at the grassroots. Together, these initiatives reflect an effort to promote self-reliance, enhance skill development, and integrate market linkages, thus laying the groundwork for more sustainable livelihood generation. The substantial financial commitment, such as the allocation of ₹500 crore annually for FOCUS and ₹300 crore for CM-Elevate also highlights the government's political will to address unemployment through investment.

Despite these strengths, the initiatives are not without limitations. A critical concern is their heavy reliance on government subsidies and grants, which raises questions about long-term sustainability. Programs such as CM-Elevate and FOCUS may provide immediate relief and short-term opportunities, but unless the enterprises supported by these schemes become market-competitive, there is a risk of continued dependency on state funding. Furthermore, while initiatives like PRIME hubs and MGMP generate promising opportunities, their benefits appear more concentrated in urban centers such as Shillong and Tura, potentially leaving rural and remote youth at a disadvantage. This urban-rural disparity could inadvertently exacerbate existing inequalities in access to employment opportunities. Another limitation lies in the limited absorptive capacity of the private sector in Meghalaya. Although the government projects ambitious targets, such as CM-Elevate which aim of creating more than 50,000 jobs but many of the supported enterprises remain micro in scale and may not generate stable, long-term employment. Cultural initiatives like MGMP, while successful in promoting

alternative income streams, largely create part-time or gig-based work rather than secure livelihoods. Moreover, the proliferation of multiple schemes with overlapping objectives, ranging from FOCUS to PRIME and YESS Meghalaya, risks fragmentation and inefficient use of resources in the absence of a coordinated framework. Most importantly, these initiatives do not fully address the structural challenges underlying unemployment in Meghalaya. Issues such as weak industrial growth, inadequate private sector presence, poor infrastructure, and the persistent mismatch between educational outcomes and employable skills remain unresolved. While livelihood schemes provide necessary pathways for survival and creativity, they cannot substitute for the systemic reforms needed to expand the state's formal job market. As such, the initiatives represent important steps toward employment generation, but they function more as mitigating measures rather than transformative solutions to the unemployment problem.

The MDA Government's livelihood and employment programs offer a diverse and innovative set of responses to youth unemployment in Meghalaya. Their focus on agriculture, entrepreneurship, culture, and community development has created new avenues of income generation and fostered youth participation in meaningful ways. However, their sustainability, equity of reach, and long-term effectiveness remain constrained by structural barriers in the state's economy. For these initiatives to translate into enduring solutions, they must be complemented by deeper reforms that expand industrial capacity, strengthen private sector engagement, and align education with employable skills. Only then can Meghalaya move beyond temporary relief measures toward a more robust and inclusive employment ecosystem.

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