



YOUTH BONUS

an alarming anxiety or a promising hope?

'Sixty-two years ago, there was a nation in search of a land, at present there is a piece of land in search of a nation'

'The young generation loves Pakistan but does not like it'

These two quotations caught my attention when I entered the conference hall to attend the launch of The Next Generation report, organised by the British Council Pakistan.

The report brings to the forefront some critical, hard hitting and eye-opening facts related to the youth of Pakistan. It projects the numbers and population trends at present and its alarming explosion in the next two decades. And yet, it could actually be seen as an opportunity for economic development. The report also sheds light on the economic and development indicators and the growth rates since Pakistan came into being.

Using indicators and reports from national and international development agencies, it presents an honest picture of the development mishaps still to be rectified, such as inadequate healthcare facilities, illiteracy and poor education, gender discrimination, absence of employment opportunities, political and economic instability, and massive


urbanisation. It sheds light on the perceptions, aspirations, feelings, commitments and suggestions of youth from various walks of life – students, housewives, the labour force, professionals and die-hard optimists. In a nutshell, it emphasises that in the next two decades, Pakistan's projected population will exceed 260 million, more than half of which would be young adults. Hence, there exists a window of opportunity to capitalise on this and create prospects now which could lead to a stronger nation, economically and socially.

While going through the report, one may experience either an anxiety or, on the other hand, a sense of hope – it depends on how one wants to perceive it. If seen as a problem, it will lead to a feeling of hopelessness, but if it is perceived optimistically, it paves the way for hope and enthusiasm. Initially, I was anxious but as I started reflecting on the report, it provided a totally new dimension and I felt a sense of hope and excitement.

What channelled my thoughts in a positive direction was the excitement, the happiness, and the energy which I have experienced while working with the youth and reading about the work that they have been carrying out to bring about an improvement. I see youth around me volunteering for the I Own Karachi initiative by taking responsibility for their city. I've come across youth providing selfless service in hospitals and children's wards.

Recently, I got to know about a youth group in Multan who negotiated with food caterers and marriage halls administration not to throw away the food which is available in excess, once the last guest has left the wedding reception. These young volunteers then collect the remaining food, pack it into boxes and provide it to the people living in slums, who do not even get a single meal in a day. I see youth volunteering their services to senior citizens of the community by reading newspapers to them, taking them on wheelchairs to their prayer places and bringing them back home, supporting them and spending some time with them to learn from their inspirations and stories. I hear energetic young men and women running a radio show on an FM channel every week, engaging the youth of the city in critical and much needed discourses, asking for suggestions and improvements – and then taking personal action. I admire youth serving their communities as scouts, rovers and girl guides, controlling traffic, organising events and commemorating days for awareness about cleanliness, substance abuse, etc.

I believe that the youth is offering a lot and can offer more, if trusted, acknowledged and supported well. The question is, who will provide the support? One



can easily point a finger at the Government but I think it has to be everyone, including the Government – the philanthropists, philanthropic institutions, entrepreneurs, civil society institutions, media, political parties, corporate sector, educational institutions, community and youth organisations. But a word of caution here – involving and acknowledging the youth does not mean manipulating them by using them as ‘part timers’ or quick fixes or selling brands; we need to engage them by trusting them – and that too on a long term basis. In fact, we need to facilitate and mentor them so that they can completely take over from us some day.

Efforts are being made to achieve this end and relevant programmes are being implemented by many organisations and individuals. However, a connectivity and cohesiveness needs to be established with the larger emerging picture. This entails sitting and brainstorming together, highlighting achievements and success stories, identifying who is good at what, and what each one can offer, and then developing it into a concrete plan.

The critical question at this point is whether our policy makers, corporate sector organisations and civil society institutions are aware of the initiatives taken for and by the youth at a community level. Is there a database or an information portal available on the local, national, regional and international initiatives being taken by the youth? It may seem an ambitious agenda, but for achieving long-term success, this could be one of the

ways to move forward.

Developing, organising, maintaining and sustaining a portal for youth development could include details of individuals and organisations and the initiatives they have offered or are planning to offer to the youth. It could also talk about their success stories in various walks of life such as education, economy, entrepreneurship and community. It can provide information about the opportunities that exist at local, national and provincial levels for youth participation through internships, voluntary work, and jobs.

In addition to this basic information, one can discuss how the youth can improve through training and skill-development opportunities (free and fee-based). There can be a list of opportunities and resources for online and face to face counselling, discussion and guidance, most of which could be linked up with the youth and social service organisations.

Another option is to engage the youth through cellphones. Most young men and women in Pakistan possess them and are accessible through cell and wireless phones; the idea is to extensively engage phone companies through their CSR programmes to initiate a youth helpline service where the young not only share their views, ideas, talents, and concerns but can also ask for support and advice.

Getting the youth closer to one another through the media, especially radio and television, providing them airtime to share their successes, their realities, aspirations, concerns and ideas is another way to not only

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engage youth but to empower them at the same time.

In conclusion, I would like to reiterate that a number of possibilities exist to bring about change and make a difference in the lives of the next generation. In fact, one may get countless creative, innovative and contextualised solutions from the youth – they have the energy, courage, readiness and the will to bring about change. The only thing required is society's conviction, trust, and confidence that yes, the youth has the power and the will to do it.

I am confident that the right initiatives in the right direction will lead us to the right perception that ‘the young generation ‘loves’ and ‘likes’ Pakistan and is proud to be a Pakistani’.

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