

Growing Population of Pakistani Youth: A Ticking Time Bomb or a Demographic Dividend

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Abstract

Pakistan is considered to be the fifth largest young country in the world. Around 63 percent population of the country comprises youth aged between 15 and 33 (UN Population Fund Report 2017). Such a large young population has posed daunting challenges to the social, economic and political sectors of the state. The fast rising youth bulge of Pakistan seems to be a constantly ticking time bomb instead of a demographic dividend, threatening its very own existence. Poor youth engagement in the productive political, educational, economic and socio-cultural activities indicates ineffectiveness of the public and private sectors policies especially at the state level. The current research study is intended to identify the key factors behind the disengaged and distressed youth of Pakistan in the three core areas of education, economy and politics. For this purpose, a systematic literature review was carried out in which national and international labor survey reports, youth development index, national youth program and federal education and economic policies were critically analyzed alongside the relevant research studies, non-government organizations' reports and media coverage for a dynamic overview. Besides, interviews of relevant stakeholders were also conducted to investigate the issue from diverse perspectives. Evidently, youth partnership, empowerment, and engagement in educational, economic and political sectors can be the only way forward to address the increasing challenges of the country.

Keywords: demographic dividend, employment, literacy, youth development

Introduction

Economists often argue that “A youth bulge can either become a demographic dividend or a time bomb, depending on how young population is engaged in productive activities” (Hafeez, 2017). In national context, it is considered as a time bomb due to the lack of socio-economic opportunities and youth empowerment at the grass root level. It is assumed that “The alarming illiteracy rate, job scarcity, stagnant economy and political instability often divert the young generation towards extremism, violence, street crimes and anti-state activities” (Farooq , Idrees, TarÖq , Ghulzar, & Anwar , 2014). If a large cohort of young people cannot find employment and earn satisfactory income, the youth bulge will become a demographic bomb, because a large mass of frustrated youth is likely to become a potential source of social and political instability (Lin, 2012).

The United Nations Population Fund Report (2016-17) underscores that 63% of Pakistan’s population comprises youth out of 207 million people (Population Census, 2017). Further, it can be classified into two leading age groups. The most populous age bracket is 20-to-24, consisting of 58.5 million youngsters while around 69 million of them are aged under 15 (Labor Survey, 2015).

On the other hand, native mental health surveys have clearly identified that the most stressed out population in Pakistan are its millennial, which indicates that there is certainly something wrong in the way that the society is handling its youth. The underutilized, unskilled youth mass with a high unemployment rate has become actively disengaged and detached from their surroundings. To deal with this challenging situation, several initiatives were claimed to be taken by the state including Prime Minister’s Youth Program (2013) and higher education commission’s policies, introduced at the federal and provincial levels in various forms; however, they apparently failed to achieve the desired results. The very fact is quite evident from the Labour Survey Report (2014-2015) that showed no evident change in the age-specific youth activities. The statistics revealed that the government efforts in various age brackets such as from 15 to 19 years and 30-34 years have not yielded positive results. However, slight improvements have been observed in the age-brackets of 20-24 and 25-29 in terms of civic and economic engagements.

International and national population and youth development indexes endorsed the failure of existing youth development programs and initiatives in empowering and engaging native young population at the grass root level in Pakistan. Hence, the need arises to do an in-depth analysis of the situation in order to identify the pitfalls in the enforced policies that lead to the rising frustrations and stress in Pakistani youth. This may be due to their inability to meet the socio-economic and political expectations of society, which consequently lead them either to isolation and apathy or deviance, violence and corruption.

Research Questions

The key research questions based on the objective of the study are:

1. To what extent is the youth bulge of Pakistan a demographic dividend or a ticking time bomb?
2. What are the main factors responsible for the failure of the state to harness the benefits of its large young population?
3. How can youth be encouraged and empowered to engage in the mainstream social, political and development processes at the grass root level?

Literature Review

Youth definition varies from country to country. According to the United Nations, youth comes in the age bracket of 15 and 24 years; Government of Pakistan, Ministry of youth affairs defines youth as a time frame in which a family's dependent childhood transforms into independent adulthood and becomes a responsible citizen of a society. Moreover, prescribed age bracket of 15-29 years is consistent with the definition of youth taken by the Commonwealth.

The phenomenon of increasing youth population is called Youth Bulge. Renowned economist Lin (2012) in his blog written for the World Bank elaborates, "A youth bulge starts forming when infant mortality has been reduced, but mothers still have a high fertility rate. As a result, a large share of the population comprises children and young adults". In a country with a youth bulge, as the young adults enter the working age, the country's dependency ratio, that is, the ratio of the non-working age population to the working age population will decline. In Pakistan

today, whereas one would expect the younger population's energy to be harnessed for higher productivity and economic growth, the situation is quite opposite. The anxieties and frustrations of young Pakistanis are varied and complex. A youth bulge that was growing for the past many years has now become obese and going by Lin's argument, since the youth's unemployment rate is high, our country is sitting on a demographic time bomb. Lin's argument is substantiated by Fuller's (1995) Youth Bulge theory which states that high youth growth can be a major cause of economic stagnation, involving in militancy, social unrest and political conflicts in a state which follow the policies justifying marginalization of youth, urban-rural divide and quota system in the country due to vested interest. The bulging youth of Pakistan is not being engaged mainly due to the lack of education, poor health and wellbeing standards, political and civic detachment and lack of empowerment at the grass root level.

The UNESCO Institute for Statistics (2016-17) depicts a dismal picture of Pakistani youth with an unemployment rate of 8.2 % with no vocational and technical skills, while around 25 percent of the Pakistani youth is illiterate. Hafeez (2017) elaborates that access to education remains low in the country and the completion rate for primary education is among the lowest in the world due to inevitable access to education. It is worth noting that the country spends only 2.2 percent of its budget on education as compared to 3.6 percent fiscal spending on defense. It is evidently supported by the statistics that Pakistan ranks 147 out of 188 countries in the Human Development Index and 154 in the Global Youth Development Index (a compound index measured youth progress under five key areas of education, health and wellbeing, employment, civic participation and political engagement). As per the index, the country's score comes down 18% from 2010 and 2015, mainly due to the dramatic drop in two main domains of civic participation (58%) and political participation (69%). It is an irony to mention that Pakistan is lagging behind war-torn Syria, which stood at 137 position, and its neighboring countries including India, Bangladesh and Afghanistan which ranked 133, 147 and 167 respectively at the global youth development index. It is probably due to the absence of an effective and integrated national youth policy that is the key indicator of youth's involvement in socio-political and civic domains (GYDI&R, 2016).

However, another problem highlighted is the plight of higher education in Pakistan. The state of Pakistan has now set targets and allocated a sizeable public

expenditure on higher education. It has been recently increased from 0.2% of GDP to 1.4% of GDP that has led to a significant expansion in higher education enrolment, rising from 1.5 million to 5 million in recent years. The purpose is to educate, empower and engage youth to uplift the quality of higher education in Pakistan by increasing the number of PhD's in the country.

According to Pakistan Economics Survey (2016-2017), the Higher Education Commission (HEC) visions a phenomenal increase both in the number of doctorate degree holders in various disciplines, that is, from existing 7000 to 15000, as well as in the number of degree awarding institutions that is aimed to be doubled from 156 to 300 by 2025. It is further planned that a university campus shall be established in each district and online programs shall be strengthened to provide greater access to higher education. Another important initiative taken by HEC is to promote academia-industry linkages, through mandatory industry projects revolving around real-life issues. The idea is to promote internship and field exposure for the faculty. Pakistani universities are gradually encouraging and incubating their students to develop start-ups. Prominent institutions following the Co-op model include the Institute of Business Administration (IBA, Karachi), the Lahore University of Management Sciences (LUMS) and Ghulam Ishaq Khan Institute of Science and Technology. HEC in its Vision statement (2025) clearly states that HEC is also promoting research culture by opening of 49 Offices of Research Innovations and Commercialization (ORIC) in universities and innovative startups. Meanwhile, 84 university projects are in progress, which are in collaboration with the industrial sector and technology parks and give opportunity to young entrepreneurs to start their own tech-based ventures and attract international business outlets for collaboration and funding.

Focusing another aspect of the youth detachment, the Jinnah Institute report (2013) highlights the incapability of a state to formulate a strategy that systematically engages youth in civic and political activities at the grass root level. In this regard, Sathar, Kamran, Sadiq and Hussain (August, 2016) in their report share that political parties were unable to engage around 25 million registered young voters in the mainstream politics. Despite making tall claims, no prominent opportunities have been made for youth inclusion within the current political structure, which leads to civic apathy and political detachment on the part of youth. Moreover, the present education system fails to include civic education to equip young generation for an

active and leading role in the current democratic set up (Dean, 2007).

In addition to this, British Council Survey (2013) also revealed the lack of awareness of youth towards political system of the country; 14% of the youth had information about the government and the national assembly and 11% of youth knew about the political parties. The bleak picture showed the absence of proper mechanism and diversion of youth from the mainstream politics and democratic process. Neither the current political set up will be able to understand and respond to the demands of the increasing youth population nor can they utilize their potential for strengthening the current and future political leadership in the country. Nussbaum (2006) emphasized the quality education to equip young generation for active and critical engagement in democratic citizenship.

Pakistan Economic Survey (PES, 2015-16) claims an increase in the total labor force from 59.7 million to 61 million from 2012-13 to 2014-15, probably due to reverse migration of educated Pakistanis. The trend estimated that the total number of employed people increased from 56.0 million to 57.4 million with an induction of 1.4 million people into the productive workforce. Hence, statistically the overall unemployment rate decreased from 6.2 percent in 2012-13 to 5.9 percent in 2014-15. As per the PES Report (2015-16) fewer than 4 million citizens are unemployed in the country. In rural areas, unemployment got slashed from 5.1 percent to 5.0 percent, while in urban areas it decreased from 8.8 percent in 2012-13 to 8.0 percent in 2014-15. However, social scientists argued that official figures did not depict the true picture, rather undermined the scale of unemployment issue. According to the PES report, urban centers are suffering from higher unemployment rate mainly because of increasing influx of rural immigrants into industrial hubs without a corresponding increase in jobs in the cities. Secondly, the limited industrial and economic growth of the country makes it impossible for the state to absorb its huge youth bulge who have reached the working age. The outcome is therefore, a society reeling from the remnants of agricultural and caste-based social hierarchies on the one hand, while dealing with the urban pressures of aggressive neoliberalism on the other. In turn, this breeds confusion in identity, culture and even priorities become skewed.

Methodology

The current research study is mainly qualitative in nature and systematic literature review and interviews were used as means to collect the data.

Article Analysis

Thirty articles were found through a search of both the Web of science and the Scopus database, using the search term 'Youth Engagement' in the search field Title, Abstract, and/ or keywords (k=75). We have excluded articles that are mostly on academia and explain the teaching methodology and also the work of practitioners that did not cite any theoretical work. The criteria of inclusion of articles is thematic, focusing on socio-economic and political factors that are pertinent in youth engagement.

Besides, data were also acquired through the interviews of the practitioners, policy makers and youth representatives, who are working for youth empowerment and growth in the country. Around six experts, three from education sector and three from economic sector were interviewed in detail with semi-structured open-ended questions, while responses of 15 youth representatives were also analyzed and added following an online moderated discussion group.

Data Collection

Individual interviews of the relevant stakeholders including policymakers, educationists, government officials, researchers, psychologists and youth representatives from both the public and private sectors were conducted through open-ended semi-structured questionnaires which were recorded, transcribed and shared with the participants for validation. The data collected were measured using youth development index, labor survey, state level youth-related policies, reports and research studies, conducted both nationally and internationally in the last one decade.

Participants

- Dr. Zaman, Professor Quaid-e-Azam University
- Dr Arshad Ali, Director HEC
- Ms Leila Khan, Former Chairperson Prime Minister Youth Program

- Naveed Illahi, Deputy Secretary PM Youth Program
- Faisal Bari, Renowned National Economist
- Waqas Shahid, Media Executive and
- Youth Representatives participated in an online moderated discussion group (15)

(Consent of all the above participants has been taken)

Findings

A renowned national economist encapsulates the issue of youth bulge in these words:

“The idea of youth bulge giving a dividend and becoming the source of strength for a country is crucially dependent on the youth being literate, educated, trained and employed. If they are not, which is evidently the case in Pakistan at present, it leads to a demographic nightmare instead of dividend.”

In other words, a large number of illiterate, unskilled and unemployed youth in Pakistan poses a serious threat to the social and economic stability of the society and if not capitalized effectively, they emerge as burden rather than valuable human resource.

A systematic analysis of the interviews of experts and youth survey in the current study highlight the following as key factors responsible for demographic dividend in Pakistan.

Poor Employment Opportunities

One of the major concerns of Pakistani youth surveyed for this research is absence of equal employment opportunities. Ideally, a qualified youngster should get a job as soon as s/he graduates. However, the ground reality is quite different, which often causes stress, depression, addiction, and other anti-social activities among unemployed, educated youth.

Gulf between Academics and Industry Requirements

Qualitative analysis of interviews, on the other hand, indicates that many recruiters now complain that the local education system is not producing quality, skilled human resource that can meet the challenges of the competitive job market. Consequently this mismatch frustrates both the employers and employees:

“It isn't as if we don't get enough applications,”

Says a media house owner:

“But the quality of candidates is extremely poor. What they have been taught is not good enough to cut it at this level.”

Partially, the reason for this mismatch is assumed to be poor quality education, social stratification and lack of practical training and industry exposure. Practitioners suggest that this problem can be solved by understanding the requirement of the industry in order to design the curriculum of graduate schools accordingly, as is the case in most developed countries.

Need for Aptitude Assessment and Career Counseling

Most of the stakeholders are of the opinion that as a short term plan gaps can be bridged between academia and industry through aptitude assessment, career counseling and vocational guidance programs, starting from secondary schools to universities.

Change in Curriculum

In the long run, the skillset required by the industry should be assessed and incorporated in the curriculum with more focus on project-based training, critical-thinking and problem-solving approach than rote-learning and information-loaded traditional educational setup.

Unjust Distribution of Resources and Diverse Social Pressures

Soliciting the views of young professionals in a discourse revealed that Pakistani youth, especially in urban area, is under stress more than their rural

counterpart probably due to limited job opportunities and cut-throat competition. Moreover, traditional mindset and social pressures related to the selection of subjects, career, marriage and other life-choices has made the issue grimmer. This dilemma has further aggravated because of the unjust distribution of resources, which has distinctly fragmented our society into the haves and have-nots. The dichotomy between the two such as ostentatious flouting of wealth and power versus the laborious struggle to survive — creates fragmentation and frustration in society.

According to a college-going student from a peri-urban area in Karachi, access to opportunities is greatly skewed:

“Why does one set of rules exist for the privileged and another for the under-privileged?”

According to Hafeez (2017) a student gave his incidence where he had graduated the previous year but could not find employment even after nine months of his graduation due to the area in which he lived.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Project Based Experiential Learning Education

To prevent such disenchantment, the Higher Education Commission (HEC) of Pakistan, in its Vision 2025, has begun emphasizing academia-industry linkages, mostly encouraging projects revolving around real-life issues, field exposure and internships for the faculty and students alike.

Following the co-op model of Canada for experiential learning, local university students are encouraged to initiate their start-up projects. Several leading national universities such as IBA, LUMS and GIK Institute of Science and Technology have already introduced the model. HEC is also looking towards German style two track education that identifies student’s abilities and aptitude after high school to counsel and encourage them to opt for either a university degree or vocational training considering their individual capacities and job market.

Research Innovations and Commercialization

No society can make progress without a strong research culture as it promotes reasoning and innovative approach. To promote research culture, “HEC is encouraging research universities to establish the offices of research innovations and commercialization (ORIC) and supporting around 49 such research centers in universities nationwide where creative students and faculties are funded for their innovative startup projects. Currently, around 84 such university projects are in progress in collaboration with the industrial sector under the Technology Development Fund,” says Dr. Arshad Ali, Executive Director HEC.

Technology Parks

Further, the future plan of HEC includes technology parks which will create an enabling environment for young entrepreneurs to start their own tech-based ventures and attract international business outlets for collaboration and funding. One such project at the NUST has already been approved in consultation with the Malaysian government, while HEC plans to build seven such parks across the country to provide better employment alternatives for the future generation.

Entrepreneurship and Tech-Based Education

Majority of experts argued that the future of Pakistani youth lies in promoting entrepreneurship and tech-based education which enables them to create self-employment. However, everyone cannot be an entrepreneur, as such, we have to promote and inspire youth to learn vocational skills and take up low profile jobs as well such as running machines, plumbing, electrical, nursing, rather than going for office jobs only. This can be achieved by implementing labor laws to ensure wages and respect for skilled workers in the society. The failure of Pakistan as a State to harness the youth bulge in the next few years will ultimately lead to economic stagnation, increasing recruits for militancy, social unrest and political conflicts.

Role of the State and Government

A cross-analysis of experts’ interview and literature review suggests that the promise of tech entrepreneurship cannot be the answer to the scale of the problem at hand. Superficially, the issue seems to be dearth of the tech education resulting in low employment rate of youth in tech companies. However, the problem is systemic

and spans the entire country. The state must not be a silent bystander and should be more proactive and provide the necessary education and training to the youth.

National Youth Program

Talking about the role of the government when it comes to the youth bulge, Ms. Leila Khan, Former Chairperson Prime Minister's Youth Programme, argues that the state cannot provide jobs and competitive education to everyone. She added:

“We are, however, working in close liaison with the public and the private sectors especially with NGOs and vocational and professional training institutes, to provide optimum training and hiring opportunities for our youth,”

The government introduced the current youth programme in September 2013. Discussing the vision behind its core six schemes, Khan explains that their focus is on four crucial areas: entrepreneurship, skill development through vocational training, internship for better employment, and financial support for higher education to the underprivileged youth.

Loans for Small and Medium Enterprises

“The current youth programme has already benefitted around two million youngsters from across the country. This includes 62 percent women through various initiatives,” claims Khan. Interest-free and business loans were introduced under the current policy to support educated, unemployed youth in all four provinces who want to establish or extend their businesses. Many of the beneficiaries, Khan stated, have already started their independent, small businesses to support their families, and earn enough to return their loans and even employ others — the ripple effect of establishing and supporting small and medium enterprises (SME) sectors.

However, Labour Survey Report (2014-15) indicated that the government efforts in various age brackets such as from 15 to 19 years and 30 to 34 years have not yielded positive results; even though, slight improvement has been seen in age brackets of 20-24 and 25-29.

National Youth Employment Strategy with ILO

According to our research, the International Labour Organization (ILO) approached the then PM's youth program for the development of a National Youth Employment Strategy in June 2016 which was in its initial planning phase at the time of this study. As the strategy draft indicates, it focuses on youth who are neither in education, employment or training for a year. Besides, it targets women, ethnic minorities, rural economies, disaster-prone areas, and downtrodden districts with lowest human development indicators.

The ILO has recommended the development of a harmonized youth employment strategy for Pakistan. This entails bringing together all existing projects, programmes and institutions working for youth employment, education and training, entrepreneurship, microfinance and social protection of youth rights, under one umbrella for coherence and optimum outcomes. The strategy recommends the formation of strategic working groups at provincial and regional levels to oversee all relevant programs for employment outcomes and a unit within the provincial planning and development departments for a comprehensive analysis of existing and emerging employment sectors.

“We intend to promote overseas employment opportunities by systematic compilation and sharing of data with TEVTAS to align their training programs in line with the international requirements,” says Naveed Illahi, Deputy Secretary of the Youth Program. The key initiatives on this agenda include: The introduction of entrepreneurship programs in secondary schools and training institutes, engagement of microfinance institutions for business start-ups and business facilitation centers alongside road shows and investment conferences.

Etra (2010) aptly summarized, “What is needed is a mechanism to tap into and capitalize on the inherent civic spirit that young people and their communities feel by raising awareness about how young people can be engaged and the advantages (both for the young people themselves and the community at large) of doing so in a more formal and organized way”.

Currently, Pakistan is facing a multitude of challenges. One of the serious challenges is the rapid growth of young population. Youth disengagement at the grass root level has made all state and other stakeholders' effort futile. Pakistan has

a rich human resource with immense potential. What is needed is to capitalize the bulging youth of the country for economic growth and social and political progress. However, disintegrated and shallow initiatives, lack of political will, corrupt bureaucratic set up, short-term economic policies and education plans for budget and donors' satisfaction never achieve the optimum results.

Suggesting a remedy, a research professor Quaid-e-Azam University, rightly said, "Youth partnership through quality education, compatible employment, civic engagement, and political empowerment can be the only way forward to address the increasing challenges in the country." The important aspect of engaging the youth is to work on their subjective and collective well-being simultaneously. Life satisfaction is the important predictor of youth development that leads to good adaptation and optimal mental health. However, low satisfaction results into psychological, behavior and social ailments. In this regard, supportive parenting, functional state, active private and development partners and NGOs can play a pivotal role through integrated policies and well-connected initiatives at various levels.

Youth integration in the mainstream democratic and political process from the grassroots level is also the need of the time that demands quality civic education and development of critical thinking from the beginning to avoid the risk of exploitation at the hands of political parties.

Way Forward

The purpose of this qualitative research was to understand the core reasons of youth detachment and plight in the light of the bulk of literature, reports and experts' views regarding youth development. Perhaps future studies should focus more on quantitative method of investigation based on certain verifiable tools. Diversity of method, in-depth qualitative and longitudinal quantitative study with diverse samples, taken from all across the country might help to validate the finding of the current study.

It is recommended that more such studies should be carried out in Pakistan in comparison to other South Asian countries including India and Bangladesh, preferably comparative analysis, to investigate the factors that lead to the success and failures of youth development programs and projects for better understanding

and realistic initiatives in local context.

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