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Youth skills for life, work and development

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In 2014, the United Nations General Assembly declared July 15 (Friday) as World Youth Skills Day, to celebrate the strategic importance of equipping young people with skills for employment, decent work and entrepreneurship. Since then, World Youth Skills Day has provided a unique opportunity for dialogue between young people, Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) institutions, firms, employers' and workers' organisations, policymakers and development partners.

World Youth Skills Day 2022 takes place amid concerted efforts towards socio-economic recovery from the Covid-19 pandemic that are interconnected with challenges such as Climate Change, conflict, persistent poverty, rising inequality, rapid technological change, demographic transition and many other factors.

The celebrations of World Youth Skills Day 2022 will highlight the ongoing focus on the Transforming Education Summit (September 2022), and contribute to the work being done under its Thematic Action Track "Learning and skills for life, work, and sustainable development".

Education and training

World Youth Skills Day aims at encouraging youth to acquire various skills that would help them gain jobs and social recognition. Education and training are the keys to success in the workforce. Unfortunately, the education systems are failing to address the learning needs of many young people. In this context, skills and jobs for youth feature prominently in the 2030 UN Agenda for Sustainable Development.

Today, there are 1.3 billion young people aged 15 to 24 years, accounting for 16 percent of the global population. The active engagement of youth in sustainable development efforts is central to achieving sustainable, inclusive and stable societies and averting the worst threats and challenges to sustainable development, including the impacts of Climate Change, unemployment, poverty, gender inequality, conflict, and migration.

Young women and girls, young persons with disabilities, youth from poorer households, rural communities, indigenous people's, and minority groups, as well as those who suffer the consequences of violent conflict and political instability, continue to be excluded due to a combination of factors.

In addition, the crisis has accelerated several transitions the world of work was already undergoing, which add layers of uncertainty regarding the skills and competencies that will be in demand as the pandemic is being overcome.

Addressing challenges

The United Nations and its agencies, such as UNESCO-UNEVOC, are

well placed to help address these challenges by reducing access barriers to the world of work, ensuring that skills gained are recognised and certified, and offering skills development opportunities for out-of-school youth and those not in employment, education or training (NEET). During this Decade of Action for the 2030 Agenda, the full engagement of young people in global processes is vital to generate positive change and innovation.

But rising youth unemployment is a significant problem facing economies and societies. At least 475 million new jobs need to be created over the next decade to absorb the 73 million youth currently unemployed and the 40 million new annual entrants to the labour market.

Being ill-prepared

OECD surveys suggest that both employers and youth consider that many graduates are ill-prepared for the world of work. This is especially so in Sri Lanka, where many graduates have not followed courses that have any relevance to job market requirements. They also have a poor knowledge of English, which is essential for many jobs and professions.

In many countries, the informal sector and traditional rural sector remain a major source of employment, but these jobs are not assured. The number of workers in vulnerable employment currently stands at 1.44 billion worldwide. One in four young people in the world cannot find jobs paying more than US\$ 1.25 per day, the international threshold of extreme poverty. Again, it comes down to the skills or the lack thereof. Disturbingly, males are more likely to find employment than

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females, even in the unskilled category. This leads to widened gender inequality.

Lower quality jobs

Young people are almost three times more likely to be unemployed than adults and are continuously exposed to lower quality jobs, greater labour market inequalities, and longer and more insecure school-to-work transitions. In addition, women are more likely to be underemployed and underpaid, and to undertake part-time jobs or work under temporary contracts. In this context, World Youth Skills day will also shed light on the 'mechanisms needed to operationalise lifelong learning'. Learning is for life, not just for the 'youth' period of one's life.

UNESCO states that one reason for youth unemployment, which affects all regions around the world, is a mis-

match between the skills workers can offer and the skills which are in demand. This is known as structural unemployment. This is prevalent in Sri Lanka as well. If you glance through the vacancies sections of this newspaper, thousands of jobs are advertised, but some ads are repeated week after week, apparently because the employers cannot find suitable job takers. In other words, many people in the job market do not have the skills that the employers need.

Sri Lanka, however, has a low unemployment rate, but if the mismatch between education and the job market can be addressed, this can be brought down further. Unfortunately, many graduates expect the Government to secure jobs for them, which is a completely unrealistic expectation. On the other hand, the fault also lies with the school and university system, whose courses are not tailored to the job market.

Recent estimates suggest that 600 million jobs would have to be created over the next 15 years to meet youth employment needs. The proportion of young people not in employment, education or training (the youth NEET rate) has remained stubbornly high over the past 15 years and now stands at 30 percent for young women and 13 percent for young men worldwide. Enterprises and organisations brought skills development almost to a standstill due to lockdown measures introduced during the pandemic. Training was interrupted for 86 percent of apprentices and 83 percent of interns/trainees.

Nearly half of the enterprises have stopped paying stipend or wages to apprentices, interns and trainees. The youth population will grow by more than 78 million between 2022 and 2030. Low income countries will account for nearly half of that increase. Education and training systems need to respond to this challenge.

There should be focus on skills development among both young males and females. The latter should be encouraged to venture into the more male dominated sectors such as motor mechanism/car repair, heavy vehicle/earth-moving equipment operations, welding and air-conditioning. Males too should be encouraged to take up sewing/tailoring, cookery and other vocations. Sri Lanka already has a good structure for vocational training, with technical colleges around the island and a central Vocational Training Authority (VTA). There is a national NVQ (National Vocational Qualification) certification system that is accepted in most countries.

The problem in Sri Lanka is not essentially the lack of vocational training opportunities. The main issue is that every student tries to enter a State university, which is impossible given that only around 25,000 university openings are available annually. This means almost 100,000 students who do have the required admission qualifications cannot enter universities, whereby a large number of students end up without getting any sort of job-oriented education.

Formal training

This is one problem that our educationists and law makers should address. Our curricula must be aligned with the needs of the job market for students to find jobs easily. Unfortunately, several vocational subjects were removed from the curricula some time back, the repercussions of which we still feel. This should be rectified without delay.

Another key issue is that the informal workforce has had no formal training and depends on skills acquired by informal means. This translates into lower wages and career uncertainty.

Thus it is always better to acquire formal vocational training. In Sri Lanka, a mason or carpenter may have several *Golayas* (pupils or assistants) who learn the trade under him, but they have no certificates or formal qualifications. This may prove problematic if they apply for jobs at well-known construction companies here or abroad which generally require formal training certification.

Unemployment and poverty are two social evils. If youths are skillful, they will get jobs and become self-reliant and many problems in society would be solved. Gainfully employed youth will also not turn to drugs, vice and crime.

Parents and teachers should encourage students who display a talent for skills and subjects other than textbook studies. If a youngster displays a knack for repairing radios, let him or her continue. If she or he is forced to give it up, that could be a loss to the economy one day.

Three approaches

The school is the obvious place to start job hunting. There are three approaches - vocational subjects, education fairs and job fairs. Vocational subjects should be taught to all students, irrespective of whether they would eventually take to a vocation. Education fairs obviously focus on higher educational opportunities here and abroad, other than the State universities. By participating in these fairs, students gain an idea of what skills and qualifications are needed to find a job.

In Sri Lanka, it is virtually difficult to find a job that does not require a good knowledge of English. This is indeed why some private companies prefer school leavers who can speak good English over university graduates who are not very fluent in the language. State and private degree awarding institutions should pay more attention to this aspect. English, though not essentially a vocational subject, must be taught to all aspiring job seekers. It is also a plus point learn languages such as Korean and Japanese as these countries open their job market to foreigners.

Sri Lanka and other developing countries must also improve their STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) education. More girls should be encouraged to take up STEM subjects both in school and university.

Our policymakers as well as the youth must be aware of three more emerging challenges - automation/robotics, Artificial Intelligence (AI) and digitalisation. Yes, these trends are likely to take some skilled jobs away, but some new jobs are also likely to be created in areas such as AI.

The key is also to identify sectors where automation or digitalisation would not make much of a difference even in the future. We need youth skills for the present, but we must keep an eye on future trends as we mark World Youth Skills Day.

