

SUNDAY OBSERVER

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AUGUST 7, 2022

WORLD YOUTH DAY 2022



The importance of Intergenerational Solidarity

BY PRAMOD DE SILVA

No one wants to grow old. We wish that we could be young as long as we live. That is the power of youth, which some say is the best time of your life. It is the most productive period of our lives and the most energetic. There really is no standard definition of what youth is, but we generally believe that someone aged 15-30 can be considered as a youth. In politics and some other fields, even 35 is considered a youthful age.

Youth can be a positive force for development when provided with the knowledge and opportunities they need to thrive. Today, there are 1.2 billion young people aged 15 to 24 years, accounting for 16 per cent of the global population. This is the largest youth population ever.

But one in 10 of the world's children live in conflict zones and 24 million of them are out of school. Political instability, labour market challenges and limited space for political and civic participation have led to increasing isolation of youth in many societies. Wars and conflicts have decimated the youth population in many countries – we have experienced this ourselves.

Annual celebration

Focusing on the youth has become so important that the United Nations has declared a separate day to do so – August 12, World Youth Day. It was first designated International Youth Day by the UN General Assembly in 1999, and serves as an annual celebration of the role of young women and men as essential partners in change, and an opportunity to raise awareness of challenges and problems facing the world's youth.

By 2030—the target date for the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) that make up the 2030 Agenda—the number of youth is projected to have grown by 7 per cent, to nearly 1.3 billion. The International Youth Day celebrates the achievements and potential of youth worldwide.

This year's theme is Intergenerational Solidarity: Creating a World for All Ages.

To achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the world needs to leverage the full potential of all generations. Solidarity across generations is the key for sustainable development. We must collaborate to foster successful and equitable intergenerational relations and partnerships to ensure that “no one is left behind.”

Ageism

While intergenerational solidarity and concern for future generations is being called for in tackling global issues – with the UN Secretary-General recently putting forward new recommendations on renewed intergenerational solidarity, including in Our Common Agenda – many challenges remain.

Ageism continues to present a significant – yet, not sufficiently discussed – challenge to fostering collaboration and solidarity across age groups.

The World Health Organization defines ageism as “the stereotypes (how we think), prejudice (how we feel) and discrimination (how

we act) directed towards others or oneself, based on age”.

Ageism is an insidious and often an unaddressed issue in health, human rights and development, and has bearings on both older and younger populations around the world.

In addition, ageism regularly intersects with other forms of bias (such as racism and sexism) and impacts people in ways that prevent them to reach their full potential and comprehensively contribute to their community.

Data gaps

The Global Report on Ageism launched by the United Nations in March 2021 highlights the many data gaps that exist with regard to ageism against youth. Despite this lack of research, young people continue to report age-related barriers in various spheres of their lives such as employment, political participation, health and justice. On an individual level, these age-related obstacles can deeply impact wellbeing and livelihoods not only during the youth years, but also in adulthood.

On a societal level, ageism prevents us from thinking and designing policies and social services that adopt a life-course approach and are fair for all ages.

The Global Report on Ageism identifies intergenerational interventions as one of the three key strategies to address ageism. Intergenerational activities can also lead to a greater sense of social connectedness and strengthen intergenerational solidarity.

Objectives

Fostering intergenerational solidarity between generations is thus more than ever necessary to ensure an inclusive and sustainable recovery. As the world navigates the third year of the Covid-19 pandemic, it is especially important to recognize and address these age-related barriers to “build back better” in a manner that leverages all generations' strengths and knowledge.

In this context, the objective of this year's International Youth Day theme, Intergenerational Solidarity: Creating a World for All Ages, is to amplify the message that action is needed across all generations to achieve the SDGs and leave no one behind.

The 2022 International Youth Day will also raise awareness on certain barriers to intergenerational solidarity, notably ageism, which impacts young and old persons, while having detrimental effects on society as a whole. In countries such as Sri Lanka, where inter-generational bonds are usually very strong – grandmothers willingly care for their grandsons and granddaughters – it will be easy to carry this message across. But this may not be so in some other countries.

During the 2021 ECOSOC Youth Forum (EYF), the issues and priorities highlighted by young participants included the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, particularly related to its effect on human health, the environment, and food systems.

As part of the official outcome recommendations of the EYF, young participants stressed the importance of working towards more equitable food systems.

In addition, they highlighted



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the need for youth to make informed decisions on food choices through increasing global education on the healthiest and most sustainable options for both individuals and the environment. There were also recommenda-

tions on providing adequate capacity development with respect to the resilience of food systems, in particular during the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic and in its aftermath.

Through youth education, en-



agement, innovation and entrepreneurial solutions, this year's International Youth Day aims to provide a platform for young people to continue the momentum from the EYF.

For International Youth Day 2022, the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DESA) will work with the Major Group on Children and Youth (MGCY) to organise a global webinar for its official commemoration. The webinar will provide an opportunity for stakeholders around the world to exchange views on the topic of intergenerational solidarity, inter-generational equity, future generations, and ageism.

The young generation must however be economically empowered to bridge the intergenerational gap. Rising youth unemployment is one of the most significant problems 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.

Inequalities

In fact, young people are almost three times more likely to be unemployed than adults and are continuously exposed to lower quality of jobs, greater labour market inequalities, and longer and more insecure school-to-work transitions. In addition, young women are more likely to be underemployed and under-paid, and to undertake part-time jobs or work under temporary contracts.

One reason for youth unemployment, which affects all regions around the world, is a mismatch 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.

Firm focus needed

There should be a firm 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. This is impossible given that only around 25,000 university openings are available annually.

This means that almost 100,000 students who do have the required

admission qualifications cannot enter universities. The result is that a large number of students end up without getting any sort of job-oriented education.

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

Unemployment and poverty are two social evils. If youth are skillful, they will get jobs and become self-reliant and many problems in society will be solved.

Gainfully employed youth will also not turn to drugs, vice and crime. Parents and teachers should also encourage students who display a talent for skills and subjects other than textbook studies. If a youngster displays knack for repairing radios, let him or her continue.

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 will 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.

Local situation

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. English, though not essentially a vocational subject, must be taught to all aspiring job seekers.

Our policymakers as well as our youth must also be aware of two more challenges – automation/robotics and digitalisation. Yes, these trends are likely to take some skilled jobs away. The key is to identify sectors where automation or digitalisation will not make much of a difference even in the future.

Many skilled and educated youth also think of migrating either permanently or temporarily to another country in search of greener pastures due to lack of opportunities or low wages. This too must be addressed as a developing country cannot afford to lose most of its best brains.

The youth must also be veered away from the evils of drugs, alcohol and tobacco in order to ensure a healthy next generation. They should be encouraged to lead active lifestyles to prevent the spread of Non Communicable Diseases such as diabetes.

The youth, especially first time voters will be the decisive factor at coming elections and all political parties must get their ideas and views on development, reconciliation and other issues.

Youth marginalisation has led to two insurrections in this country, a lesson that should not be forgotten. The youth are the future and that factor must be taken into account at all times.