



Beyond 'out-of-the-box': Youth and innovation in Bangladesh

PAULINE TAMESIS

NO youth issues should be discussed without the youth. With 60% of Bangladeshis under the age of 30, the country has one of the largest youth populations in the world. Bangladesh's march to middle-income status needs to be led by the next generation and their innovations, determination and optimism. The flight of the country's success depends on ensuring greater space for the youth to be leaders, change agents, decision makers.

UNDP supports the government of Bangladesh in creating opportunities for meaningful participation of the new generation, to showcase their innovative thinking and "out of the box" ideas. Bangladesh is emerging as a thought leader in the global South as innovative solvers with limited resources but limitless imagination. Every day challenges of access to public services, dealing with the impacts of climate change, lack of market linkages, poor connectivity and social barriers, such as gender based discrimination, are being addressed by the young people of Bangladesh.

For example, we see enthusiastic young entrepreneurs running over 5,000 Union Information Service Centers in both urban and rural areas, going beyond the call of duty for their communities. They not only bring government services to the doorsteps of the people but also take the lead in tackling social issues such as gender empowerment by providing computer literacy training for women.

In another instance, young Bangladeshi software developers and IT students recently met in an event called hackathon to find ways together to use their skills to solve a social problem they felt strongly about. Out of this event, they developed useful web-based applications on safety, security and maternal healthcare for the Bangladesh application market.

Earlier, UNDP organised the Dhaka meet-up of the global Social Good Summit where hundreds of students and young innovators came to share their views on youths' role in national development and interesting ideas such as Wi-Fiservices in local buses in cities, and online interactive blood banks.

These are just a few of the numerous, innovative solutions the youth of Bangladesh are coming up with to tackle their everyday challenges. While the economy is progressing on the energy and creativity of the youth, they, however, remain at the peripheries of decision making processes. Obstacles still remain for them to participate economically and socially, such as limited access to financial resources, education, and continuing gender and age-based discrimination that is pulling them back from reaching their full potential. It is crucial to enable an environment of encouragement, incubation and implementation of their initiatives.

Through their economic and innovative pursuits, young people are also changing what we understand to be civic engagement and citizens' empowerment. The Savar tragedy is a monumental example of how young people utilised whatever means they had, in this case social media, to mobilise themselves, coordinate relief and raise national consciousness and awareness on workers' rights and well-being.

To capture this very energy, the UN at the global level is reaffirming its commitment to the new generation of upcoming and present day world citizens. Recently, the UN Secretary General's Envoy on Youth was launched with the objective of creating more opportunities for youth to work closely with the United Nations. At the national level, UNDP is finding creative ways to incorporate youth voices in its various projects and programmes, recognising that eradication of poverty cannot and will not happen without youth as part of the solution.

With two million young people entering the job market every year, it is important to provide the right set of skills for the ever changing global demands and emerging industries as well as support new entrepreneurs and their initiatives. Apprenticeship programmes such as the ones provided through UNDP's urban project are training vulnerable urban youth on skills and trade which they identified as relevant in their localities.

Young entrepreneurs are also job creators for their peers, setting up businesses in emerging sectors as ICT for development. These small/medium businesses can be graduated into large scale corporations through financial support and effective mentoring. The Social Innovation Funds Facility supported by UNDP aims to financially and structurally support young innovators who can come up with out-of-the-box solutions to public sector challenges. National level private-public partnership can facilitate scaling up of these innovative success stories to generate greater employment and having lasting impact on the society. The telecommunication sector is an excellent example of a profit-driven industry providing social support and encouraging young people to come up with new mobile technology based solutions for their everyday challenges.

Resonating from what we heard from the students who participated in the Social Good Summit, the young people of Bangladesh want platforms to raise their voices and be heard, as well as economic opportunities that reflect their hopes and aspirations. As the world community fast approaches the 2015 deadline for the Millennium Development Goals, we must take proactive roles to include the young generation in dialogues of today, for the better realities of tomorrow.

The writer is the Country Director of UNDP Bangladesh. This op-ed has been written to mark UN Day on October 24, 2013, which this year is focusing on Youth for Development.

Literacies for 21st Century

KIICHI OYASU

LITERACY is a basic right and also the foundation for lifelong learning and human development. In the case of Bangladesh, the literacy situation has improved over the years, however, according to the Literacy Assessment Survey conducted by the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics in 2011, functional literacy rate of age 11 to 44 is 53.7% as the result of reading, writing and numeracy skill tests.

To achieve literacy for all in the country, we have to consider comprehensive and multi-dimensional approaches. First and foremost, we have to ensure that all children go to school and complete basic education with decent quality. At the same time, providing flexible learning opportunities is equally important. Alternative learning mechanisms of basic education are needed for those who cannot attend formal schooling. We hope the current initiatives of second chance education and equivalency programme by Ministry of Primary and Mass Education (MOPME) will help this process of making education available for disadvantaged children.

In the area of literacy programmes of youths and adults, there have been various efforts with tangible results and impact to promote literacy through campaigns and non-formal education courses of literacy and skill training, but all these efforts are not always sustained after the completion of each project. Building on these experiences, Bureau of Non-formal Education (BNFE) is currently developing a community learning network through joint efforts of community, NGOs and government including union, upazila and district offices. Unesco is happy to be associated with this effort.

This year's International Literacy Day is dedicated to 'Literacies for 21st century' to highlight the need to realise basic literacy for all and also equip everyone with more advanced literacy skills. This theme suggests literacy is diverse in terms of its domain, not only reading, writing and numeracy but also vocational, legal, medical, ICT and others. Furthermore, literacy is a continuous process to update our knowledge and skills, coping with and proactive to the dynamic

changes in the society. Therefore, it is difficult and unrealistic to simply divide literate and non-literate since the knowledge and skills required as literate persons are changing according to the rapid development of modern society of 21st century.

To respond to the diverse meanings and potential for future, we probably need to review how to deliver basic education. We often discuss formal education and non-formal education separately with different policies, settings and strategies. Though it is necessary to maintain specific focus of respective sub-sectors, we also need to develop integrated and holistic approaches to synergise the resources and experiences of these sub-sectors to promote literate environment in school, home, workplace and the entire society. Such environment can be developed through cooperation



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with different sectors and dialogues of different generations of children, youths, adults and senior citizens. Inter-sectoral and inter-generational learning is crucial for the learning society in 21st century.

It is important to obtain various kinds of literacies, at the same time, we have to think how to use these skills for individuals and for our society. Equipping literacies for 21st century may imply the ability to continue to learn new knowledge and skills, coping with rapidly changing environment, and also the ability to use them for betterment of individuals and for sustainable future of our society.

The writer is Officer-in-Charge, Unesco.

Our forgotten neighbour

SARWAR JAHAN CHOWDHURY

THE panoramic view of the snow covered mountains and the greenery in the mountain saddles and in the valleys across the Daughter of Himalaya are the epitomes of the timeless beauty of nature; whatever is left unaffected beyond the province of human engineering. Nepal is geographically so close to us and to our deltaic marshes, yet it is utterly exotic, romantic and excitingly mysterious.

There is some degree of people-to-people connectivity between Bangladeshis and the Nepalese. Nepali students have been joining Bangladeshi higher education institutes for several years now. Nowadays, many Bangladeshi tourists go on holidays to Nepal, which, a couple of decades back, was considered an inaccessible place to be visited only by western adventurers. Nepal is like a newly discovered land for middle class Bangladeshis, so much so that it has turned out to be a favourite shooting spot for Bangladeshi TV serials, dramas, and telefilms.

But beneath the veneer of picture-perfect scenery lies the reality of social and political stagnation and potential for unrest. Maoist insurgency lasted

about a decade prior to a peace accord. The peace accord spelled the demise of Nepal's century old authoritarian monarchy and turned the Himalayan country into a constitutional republic. The stoppage of conflict hasn't brought about any lasting solution as yet. The post-monarchy constitutional assembly failed to reach a consensus on a new republican constitution, and governments were formed and toppled every now and then after the election in 2008. Before the present interim one three governments were formed, led by three different prime ministers, with some periods a whisper away from plunging into chaos and violence again.

We and our media are obsessed with India, Pakistan, China, Middle East and the West. We don't see anyone else even if they are our close geographical neighbours and share some similarities socially and politically. Like us, Nepal is also stuck in a political stalemate. The nature of the stalemate is a bit different though.

In the 2008 constitutional assembly election the Maoists won a lot of votes and seats, the single largest share in fact, but not a clear majority and far off from the two-third majority necessary to write the constitution on their own. The Nepali Congress came second and



the old communist party the NCP (UML) came third with almost similar figures like the Nepali Congress.

All these parties and their leaders consider each other rivals and are often belligerent towards each other beyond political propriety. Strangely, the two communist outfits, the Unified NCP (Maoist) and the old NCP (UML), can't reach a lasting compromise either. It appears that ideology, welfare of the people etc. are overshadowed by the ego clashes among the old guards and the fresh bloods of Nepali politics.

The Nepali dynasties and landed aristocracy belonged to this elite group caste/ethnicity wise. This group dominated Nepal economically in terms of access to land and state resources, and also held sway politically and socially over others.

Madeshi people, who are very similar to the people of the Indian state of UP and Bihar, live in the southern Tarai Plains and are mostly low/middle caste Hindus. They are also about one-third of Nepal's population. The Janajati, who are mostly the Dalit/untouchable Hindus, form about one-fifth of Nepal's populace and live both in the south and in the hills. There are also racial groups who identify themselves as Mongoloid tribes. Within Madeshi, Janajati and the tribes there are variations. The Nepali concoction is diverse and complex. About 80 % citizens of Nepal follow Hinduism. About 44 % of Nepalese, that includes mostly the caste Hindus and some other people mostly in the hills, speak the language called Nepali. The rest speak other Indian (Maithili, Bhojpuri, Hindi etc.) and tribal languages.

The Maoist insurgency is widely considered by Nepal experts as political expression of deprived sections of Nepali society like the Madhesi,

Janajati and the tribes. Social, political and economic deprivation of these strata are already being addressed to some extent. Although there were further fragmentations in Nepali polity, in line with overt social cleavage apart from the apparent ideological ones, a precise picture is yet to show up. Things will be more crystallised after the upcoming election. We will then know whether the national parties like UNCP (Maoist), Nepali Congress or NCP (UML) can hold on to their electoral bases or will the community based parties take the forefront.

It could perhaps be assumed even now that no one party will be able to occupy centre stage in Nepali politics. Though socio-political mobilisation based on fragments of a diverse society is easier nowadays, the real challenge lies in holding together instead of plummeting into anarchical chaos. Breakups have become commonplace these days; accommodation and rebuilding after a big change is a task for farsighted. Does Nepal have enough of such leadership? That is the million dollar question now.

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