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Technical and vocational skill training: Expansion alone is not the answer



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The inactive youth

Today, around 40 percent of the population aged between 15 and 24 years in Bangladesh are classified as "not in education, employment or training (NEET)", according to a recent ILO report. The actual number adds up to 11.6 million youth or about one-fifth of the total working age population.

ILO's statistical report on Asia-Pacific Decent Work Decade 2006-15 stated that the NEET rate in Bangladesh is the third worst in the region—behind Maldives (56 percent), a small island in the midst of political turmoil; and Yemen (48 percent), wracked by a deadly civil war for the past several years. The rate of youth inactivity is much worse for women—estimated at 62 percent in Bangladesh.

What does the state of inactivity of the youth mean in practical terms for young people and society? These are youths who have not chosen to be in the situation they are in. They would rather be in school or university, participate in training, or better still, be in a job that pays a decent wage. The prevailing education and training programmes, or the employment market, do not offer them a viable opportunity, at least in their eyes. They are, in academic jargon, described as "at most risk of marginalisation from the labour market and society."

World Bank economist Zahid Hussain has said that the state of youth inactivity is not only an economic waste, but it is also liable to create social risks. "Many youths cannot secure jobs, depending on their general education.

They become easy prey for evil forces that derail them," he said. "They are the people who could produce the demographic dividend, but we are wasting that advantage," he added (*Prothom Alo*, December 1, 2016).

Debapriya Bhattacharya, Convenor of the Citizen's Platform for SDGs, compared the social tensions arising from the job crisis with a ticking "time bomb". "The youth cannot get decent jobs due to the lack of necessary indus-

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trial growth. They are deprived of quality education, and do not have the training required to meet the demands of the employment market," he said.

The state of inactivity of the youth is symptomatic of the larger and deeper problem of misalignment of jobs, skills, the economy, education, and training.

A critical look at skills development

The workforce in Bangladesh amounts to around 60 million. Up to two million young people are entering the workforce each year. Although access to education has grown, the vast majority of the working population lacks general education or occupational skill training.

Data from the last Labour Force Survey of 2013 shows that half of the workers had either no education (21 percent) or less than complete primary education (29 percent). A mere 6 percent had tertiary education.

Extrapolating recent data, it can be surmised that the total skills training opportunities from diploma, certificate and short courses with formal education pre-requisites and course content affiliated to Bangladesh Technical Education Board (BTEB) currently serve only 500,000 trainees each year. Another half million is served by flexible short-duration courses with diverse contents, mostly unregulated by BTEB, and offered mostly by NGOs and private providers. Of this million participating in various skills training, approximately 75 percent on average, according to BTEB estimates, are expected to complete the courses, indicating that the number of workers with some level of skill training stands at about 750,000 annually.

Four points stand out from these figures:

1. A very low level of basic education and general competencies place workers in a low education, low skill, low productivity, and low earning trap.

2. For a national work force of around 60 million (of which one-third

is in the 15-24 age group), low and mid-level skills development provisions for about a million trainees (and 750,000 completers) per year cannot be considered adequate.

3. The balance between diploma level and certificate and basic level training is clearly a problem. With workers overwhelmingly engaged in low-skill work, only a small fraction of such workers are served by the training provisions.

4. The inadequacies in numbers and balance are symptomatic of weaknesses in market responsiveness, quality, and relevance of the training courses, further discussed below.

Two other related points are relevant about skills development, education, and training. First is the issue of informal employment and skills. More than 80 percent of the workers are employed in what is known as the informal economy and informal economic activities that are unregulated, both in urban and rural areas, and are characterised by low skills and low wages, mostly in small enterprises or self-employment. The technical and vocation education and training (TVET) system does little for the vast number of workers in the informal economy. There is a large co-occurrence between the lack of skills development opportunities, low skill status of workers, low productivity and low earnings of informal sector workers. Changing these conditions to those characterised as decent work, with better productivity, earnings and social protection is a major challenge for skills development and job creation in Bangladesh.

Second is the need for a broader view

of skill development. It is evident that the commonly used term TVET can be confining and has to be broadened to embrace all forms of technical and vocational skills development (TVSD). A skill development system that serves fewer than 20 percent of the workers, which is the case with the recognised TVET that exists today, is obviously not the total system. The policy development and action priorities have to be based on a broader view of the system.

SDG skills goals

The question of youth employment, education and training has gained prominence as one of the 17 United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) to promote "decent work for all", namely Goal 8. Bangladesh has endorsed the global SDG goals and incorporated them into its national development goals.

The 12 targets related to Goal 8 include macroeconomic measures supportive of job growth, development-oriented policies that support productive activities, policies to achieve full and productive employment and decent work for all women and men, including young people and persons with disabilities, and reducing the proportion of youth not in employment, education, or training. Targets are also indicated for protecting labour rights and promoting safe and secure working environments for all workers, including migrant workers, women migrants in particular, and those in precarious employment.

The overarching SDG goal regarding inclusive and quality education for all

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