

Youth demographic should be better utilised

This window of opportunity won't last forever

THE United Nations Population Division in its data for 2017 estimates around 68 percent of our population are of working age. This means Bangladesh currently has a rare demographic window of opportunity—where the working age population surpasses that of non-working age. At this crucial juncture, about 29.8 percent of our population aged 15-29 are not in education, employment or training (NEET). And, as a result, we are missing out on reaping the “demographic dividend” that this window of opportunity presents.

Out of all the unemployed people in the country, about 80 percent of people are between the ages of 15-29. And out of the total unemployed population of 26.77 lakh, the number of educated unemployed people stands at 10.43 lakh. This is particularly concerning as it demonstrates the failure of our higher educational institutions to produce graduates who are finding success in the job market, and a clear disparity between the skills they are providing to young people and the skills that the market is demanding.

In order to bridge this gap, institutes of higher education need to form better connections with suitors in the job market, and the vocational training that students are being given needs to be attuned more towards employability. As experts have highlighted, while expatriate workers are sending in about USD 15.5 billion in remittances, over USD 5 billion is leaving the country every year as salary of foreigners employed mostly in top managerial positions within Bangladesh. While foreign experts are necessary, many of these positions could be occupied by domestic workers if they are given the right skillset, which is what we should be aiming for.

Besides restructuring our education sector, the government also needs to find ways to increase employment opportunities for people in general, keeping in mind that not everyone should have to receive higher education to find jobs. And it should do so soon in order to ensure we do not end up squandering this rare opportunity that we now have, and to make the most of our current wealth of human resources.

Deteriorating flood situation

Gear up rescue and relief efforts

A good part of the country's north and eastern regions has been affected by severe flood. While this is a yearly phenomenon, this year both the north and the eastern and hilly regions have been affected simultaneously, submerged by heavy rains as well as being inundated by overflowing rivers. The three CHT districts have been severely hit too. Nearly a million-and-a-half people have been affected and a vast swathe of croplands have been inundated. On the other hand, the capital city and the port city have suffered the severe consequences of continuous rain—which is not likely to abate for another three days—and of the poor drainage facility, disrupting normal life.

While it is noteworthy that the government has already alerted the local administration, we feel that both rescue and relief operations should commence without delay. In many parts of the affected areas in the outlying regions, people are marooned with very little to survive on, and many have sought shelter on the embankments. These are the ones that must be moved to safer places immediately and have food and drinking water made available to them. A prolonged stay on the embankments is a danger to them as well as the embankments.

While during-the-disaster actions are extremely essential to ensure that no lives are lost, what is equally important is taking prompt measures during the post-flood period, after the floodwaters have receded. It is essential to plan for the rehabilitation of the affected people and sustaining them till the next harvest. Agricultural loan should be made easily available as well as the necessary agricultural inputs, while the aspect of health of these people should also be addressed, as they could be vulnerable to waterborne diseases.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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Compromising the wellbeing of the public

After collecting 10 random samples from pasteurised and non-pasteurised milk, Dhaka University researchers have yet again found antibiotics in milk being sold in the market. The findings were eye-opening. The second round of DU study detected four antibiotics meant for human consumption in all 10 samples. Last month it was revealed that detergent and antibiotics were detected in packaged milk. Milk is a staple in the diet of almost everyone, especially children. Antibiotics and detergent can cause cancer along with other chronic diseases. How are dairy companies getting away with this?

The Bangladesh Standards and Testing Institution (BSTI)—the sole national quality control authority for food—also conducted tests but found no presence of such substances. According to newspaper reports, the BSTI tests milk against 9 parameters and do not have the appliance for detecting antibiotics and pesticides, whereas DU had used 19 parameters.

We are flabbergasted as to how a government organisation responsible for food safety neither has the required equipment nor the proper testing procedures. This points to severe inefficiency and disregard for public health. The government must bring the companies violating food standards to book and take action against them because enough is enough.

Mohammad Zonaed Emran, by email

A healthy right-to-information regime is in everyone's best interest

SHAMSUL BARI and RUHI NAZ

FUNDS stolen by political leaders. School supplies siphoned off by a contractor. Ghost workers created to claim benefits. Evidence of government-sanctioned torture. Trees that were meant to be planted but never were... these are just some of the stories unearthed by using Right to Information (RTI) or Freedom of Information (FOI) laws in some 130 countries. These laws oblige governments to disclose information they normally would not. The range of issues that citizens can tackle using RTI laws may surprise many readers.

In our last column, we highlighted the efforts of a young man in Bangladesh who

contained no actual Parmesan cheese. The makers were mislabelling their products by filling them with a mixture of other cheeses and cellulose, a common anti-clumping agent made from wood. The president of the company faced a one-year prison term and a fine of USD 100,000.

Another area where RTI laws have been used as a tool to uncover corruption is financial manipulation. An RTI request by a journalist from the *Indian Express* revealed that a Maharashtra minister had purchased land well below market value, just before it was due for acquisition by the Maharashtra Industrial Development Corporation. The objective was to sell the land later at a higher price to the

enabling citizens to witness what goes on behind closed doors. The secrecy surrounding the purchase of US Treasury bonds by Saudi Arabia was ended by a FOI request by Bloomberg News. The response revealed that as of March 2016, Saudi Arabia had stockpiled USD 116.8 billion of US Treasuries. The information had remained one of the biggest mysteries in global finance for four decades, unlike with most other major owners of US debt. This had to do with the sensitivity surrounding US-Saudi relationship. The response to the FOI request also revealed a number of other important information about US foreign debt.

Serious human rights transgressions are not immune to investigation under

from Prince Charles to ministers should be made public. It also represented a fundamental challenge to the use of ministerial veto to block the release of material that the government particularly felt the need to keep secret, after either the information commissioner or the Tribunal has ruled it should be published.

The Court's majority judgment stated that it is a fundamental principle that “a decision of a judicial body should be final and binding and should not be capable of being overturned by a member of the executive.” The ministers, therefore, cannot overrule a Tribunal decision that information should be released under FOI just because they disagree with it. Other factors need to be in play, such as the emergence of new considerations.

There are also less serious and more innocuous use of the law. The BBC used the UK FOI law to obtain transcripts of conversations between British Prime Minister John Major and US President George HW Bush Sr. It showed that the two frequently commiserated with each other and had a close and bantering relationship.

These examples demonstrate the wide range of topics on which RTI/FOI requests have been made throughout the world. In Bangladesh, while NGO efforts and those of a few die-hard RTI activists have kept the RTI ball rolling, its use has been limited and not as creative as it could be. We hope to stimulate the more educated and socially conscious sections of our society to understand the tremendous value and reach of the law, appreciate its importance for society and put it to proper use.

As seen in the examples, not all RTI applications need to deal with corruption, malfeasance or misdeeds of public officials which many in Bangladesh believe to be the main objective of the law. In fact, the law has been used all over the world for obtaining information on larger issues of societal and national interest, which do not necessarily require pointing accusing fingers at anybody. Seeking such information should give no reason to public officials to be afraid of disclosure, which they are when faced with information requests of a sensitive or self-incriminatory nature.

In fact, it is a good strategy for citizens to start their acquaintance with the law by seeking information of a general nature, which would benefit the society at large and at the same time create the practice among public officials to respond to RTI requests more dutifully, which, unfortunately, is not the case today. Once such a relationship is developed, the use of the law could be upscaled to focus more seriously on issues of accountability and transparency.

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used the RTI Act 2009 to fight the filling-in of public ponds and water bodies owing to the massive urbanisation of Dhaka city.

In India's Jammu and Kashmir, an activist used the RTI act to visit a site where the state claimed trees were being planted to combat deforestation. It turned out that barely 10 percent of the trees were planted and the funds were being embezzled. The revelation led to public outcry and pressure from environmentalists for corrective measures.

In an era where governments claim advances in public health, nearly 17,000 children died from malnutrition in 2015-2016 in the Indian state of Maharashtra, the Bombay High Court was told based on data obtained through RTI queries. The court found the numbers “shocking and disturbing.”

A journalist from an investigation team of Bloomberg News used the US FOI Act 1966 to obtain a report from the Federal Department of Agriculture, which revealed that a major Parmesan cheese brand

government.

In Malawi, public officials controlling a public works programme connived to create 20 ghost beneficiaries in the hope of sharing the proceeds. The chairperson of a local Community Rights Club submitted an RTI request for a list of the beneficiaries, thereby exposing the fraud.

In another Malawi case, requests for information about contracts to provide school supplies led to investigation that proved they were not delivered. Subsequently, the supplier was forced to reimburse all funds meant for the supplies.

The Access to Information law of Mexico was successfully used to learn that some municipal workers of a particular municipality had two jobs and that a politician's relatives benefitted from the construction of the municipal slaughterhouse and municipal sanitary sewer.

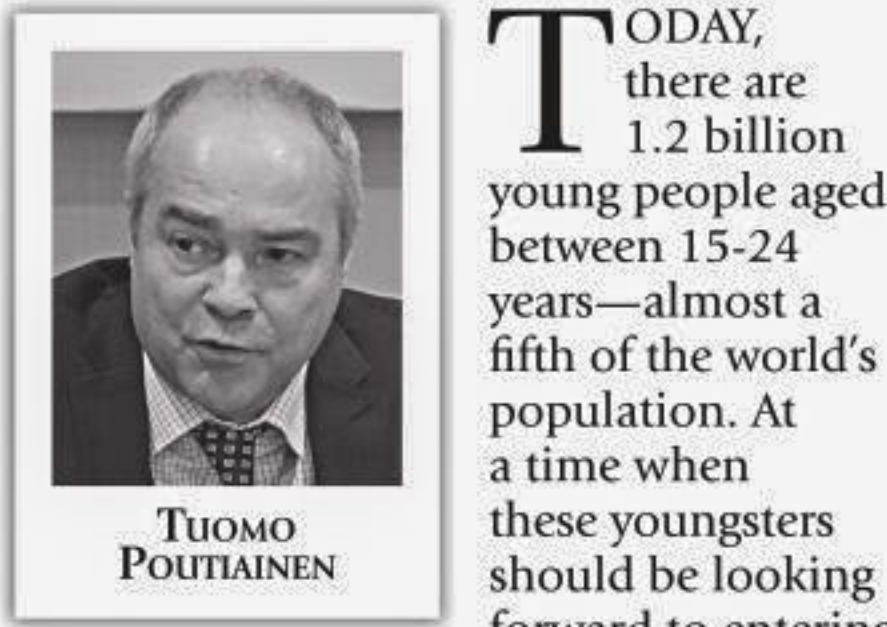
Even high-level shenanigans can be brought into the light using these laws,

RTI laws. In response to a FOI Act request filed by the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), the US government was obliged to disclose new portions of transcripts from military hearings in 2007, in which “high-value” detainees described being tortured by the CIA at Guantanamo Bay. The importance of the information was described by an ACLU staff attorney as follows: “At a time when some politicians are proposing that the torture programme be resurrected, it's crucial that the American public have access to these first-hand statements, and not only to the self-serving accounts offered by those who authorised the torture.”

Even royalty is not spared from the purview of RTI laws. The Supreme Court of England's ruling that Prince Charles' letters to ministers fell within the ambit of the FOI Act of the UK extended the arm of the law to the most sensitive area of the relationship between the Royal Family and the British government. The ruling implied that “advocacy correspondence”

WORLD YOUTH SKILLS DAY

Skills learning changes lives and must be lifelong



TODAY, there are 1.2 billion young people aged between 15-24 years—almost a fifth of the world's population. At a time when these youngsters should be looking forward to entering adulthood and the world of work, many are entering a period of uncertainty and certain unemployment.

These youngsters are three times more likely to be unemployed and—if they are fortunate enough to land a job—at far greater risk of low-quality, poorly paid, unskilled jobs. The situation is even worse for young women in search of decent work and livelihoods; they are more likely to be underemployed, underpaid and under temporary or part-time contracts.

As we mark World Youth Skills Day 2019, we must highlight the plight of today's youth and the urgent need for governments across the globe to invest in the skilling of these young people.

Bangladesh is a relatively young country where the median age is just 25 years. Each year, more than two million young Bangladeshi men and women enter the labour market seeking decent work and pay.

These youngsters are living in one of the world's fastest growing economies, boasting a growth rate of 7.9 percent for the past two years. Sadly, many millions are oblivious to this growth and not benefitting from the financial boom. Bangladesh's youth must be an integral part of the nation's economic success story, and that means equipping them with demand-driven skills and making them employable—not just in Bangladesh, but anywhere in the world where marketable skills are needed.

To address this demand, the government has placed great emphasis on strengthening the skills development system, in particular, the technical and vocational education and training (TVET) sector.

Working with the ILO, through a European Union-funded project called Skills 21, the government is also putting in place a strengthened qualification framework. Focused on the learner, it will allow for greater flexibility in learning as well as help in developing a stronger system for comparing qualifications earned in Bangladesh with those in other parts of the world.

Given that a large part of the Bangladesh economy is still informal, it is

day labour market. For example, an excellent training programme on how to operate typewriters—in the digital age of computers and the Internet—has very little relevance or need. This is why industry and employers must be involved in deciding what training should be offered, and also be directly involved in delivering practical, on-the-job training.

A good example is the importance of marketable language skills in the care-giving sector. With rapidly ageing populations in Japan, South Korea and

mother tongue, could help potential carers secure decent jobs and transform their lives and that of their families.

Such a system must also offer equal access for all—especially young women, vulnerable communities and those with disabilities.

The ILO's experience shows that supporting youth in their school-to-work transition, using industry-led apprenticeships, and offering the latest digital skills training will help Bangladesh's youth better prepare for the jobs of the 21st



Each year, more than two million young Bangladeshi men and women enter the labour market seeking decent work and pay.

PHOTO: STAR

important to realise that a large number of young people learn skills through informal apprenticeships or on-the-job training. It is, therefore, critical to have a system that not only recognises these skills but also certifies them in line with international standards.

It is also important that the skills being learnt are relevant to the modern-

many parts of western Europe, there is huge potential for decent work in caring for the elderly. A smart government initiative is encouraging Bangladeshi youngsters, who are aspiring to migrate to South Korea and Japan, to learn Korean and Japanese. Being a skilled caregiver is one thing but being able to effectively communicate with your ward, in *their*

century.

That is why every young Bangladeshi, irrespective of whether they are male or female, disabled or otherwise, must be given an opportunity to learn the skills of tomorrow. Not just today, but throughout their lives.

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