Tapping on the potential of the youth

It is critical that we safeguard young people's well-being because India's welfare hinges on them

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World Population Day is marked on July 11 every year to focus attention on the importance of population-related issues. It was first observed by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in 1989 and aims to raise the discourse on sustainable ways to safeguard each life that adds up to a population.

As flagged by a UNDP report last year, and subsequently in a global study by *The Lancet*, India will stabilise its population 12 years earlier than expected. Therefore, the window India has to leverage its 'demographic dividend' is narrower than we had thought. Fears of a 'population explosion' are misplaced; instead, it is critical that we focus our attention on safeguarding young people's well-being because India's welfare hinges on them.

Impact of the pandemic

At 253 million, India's adolescent population is among the largest. Over 62% of India is aged between 15 and 59 years, and the median age of the population is less than 30 years. India's 'demographic dividend' represents the potential for economic growth based on the age structure of the population. However, transforming this potential into reality requires adolescents and the youth to be healthy and well-educated.

Even before COVID-19 caused country-wide school closures, India's underfunded education system was inadequately equipped to provide the skills young people need to take advantage of emerging employment opportunities. According to the World Bank, public expenditure on education constituted 4.4% of GDP in 2019 and only 3.4% of GDP in 2020. Another report revealed that India stands 62nd in terms of public expenditure per student, and fares badly in quality of education measures such as student-teacher ratios. Coupled with the impact of COVID-19, this paints a bleak picture of the state of education today.

In India, more than 32 crore students have been affected by the nationwide lockdown due to COVID-19. Of these, about 15.8 crore are female. The number of schoolgirls who are impacted is 158 million and many of those who have dropped out are unlikely to go back to school. Schools have remained closed even in remote areas where the effect of the pandemic has been minimal. Studies show that school closures have a serious impact on the lives and mental well-being of children.

The impact of the pandemic on adolescents has been severe. A survey by the International Labour Organization reveals that 65% of adolescents worldwide reported having learnt less during the pandemic, and 51% felt that their learning would be further delayed. It also highlighted that adolescent mental well-being has taken a big blow, with 17% of young people likely to be suffering from anxiety and depression.

It is important, therefore, for policymakers to balance the risks of transmission through children with the harm of prolonged school closures. By prioritising the vaccination of teachers and school support staff and also allowing a decentralised approach where district-level officials may reopen schools based on local COVID-19 transmission rates, schools could be opened in a safe and phased manner. In Odisha, for example, community schools have re-opened in some areas. Students wear face masks and sit physically distanced from each other outdoors under sheds or tents. With some innovation and creativity, opening schools with a mix of online and offline options could be an important step to addressing the learning needs and mental well-being of adolescents.

Increased poverty levels during the pandemic may well have led to a worrying spurt in early marriages of girls in India. As demographers like Shireen Jejeebhoy note, while child marriage as a strategy to address household poverty has been noted in India in general, it has registered an alarming rise during the pandemic. This is linked with increases in gender-based violence. Adolescent girls are at high risk during times like these, given their vulnerability to abuse and trafficking, especially if primary caregivers fall ill or die. Restricted mobility due to lockdowns puts girls at risk of violence at home at the hands of caregivers or partners. The impact of the crisis on adolescents, especially girls, is of gigantic proportions, but the problem is not irredeemable, provided we display firm commitment to implementing quick and effective strategies to overcome the challenges.

The way forward

We are living through a global crisis and the road ahead is uncertain. This will have long-standing effects on adolescents and youth. Recognising that COVID-19 has affected all dimensions of the lives of youth, collaborative actions by key ministries, government agencies, and civil society will be central to developing a holistic and meaningful solution. It is imperative that we have in place mechanisms for better inter-sectoral collaboration as we move to safeguard the futures of our adolescents. School mid-day meals, for example, exemplify how improved nutrition benefits learning. Not only do they provide an incentive for parents to send their children to school on the assurance of one nutritious meal; they also provide the calorie intake required to stay alert in the classroom. Studies have established strong links between nutrition and cognitive scores among teenagers. Coordination across departments can enable better solutions and greater efficiencies in tackling the crisis that our adolescents face.

Much could be gained if the Ministry of Education took steps to ensure that adolescents, especially girls, continue their education during the pandemic. Simultaneously, the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare must collaborate with the Education Ministry to disseminate key information to help adolescents safeguard their health and ability to learn.

Given that school closures have impacted access to schemes such as the delivery of menstrual hygiene products to adolescents, teachers can work as volunteers for collaborating with frontline health workers to distribute sanitary napkins to girls. To address the mental health of adolescents, the Health and Education Ministries should strengthen outreach via existing helplines and by enabling conversations on critical issues regarding their reproductive and sexual health.

There is enough academic research to demonstrate how the demographic dividend contributed to growth in other countries, especially during East Asia's economic miracle of 1965-1990. During that period, East Asia's working age population grew at a faster rate than its dependent population, thereby expanding the per capita productivity of these economies. This occurred because East Asian countries developed social, economic, and political institutions and policies that allowed them to realise the growth potential created by the transition.

Improving the lives of our adolescents in mission mode would lift their lives, but also generate a virtuous cycle with healthier and educated young adults contributing substantially to securing India's future.

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