

The big opportunity

A rising youth population in India can be a silver lining



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According to various international studies, the median age in India would be 28 years by 2022-23, in contrast to 37 in China and 45 in western Europe. This is not an ageist remark, but rather an enormous growth opportunity as India will have the highest number of people in the workforce. In other words, India's non-working population would be outnumbered by the working population, leading to a favourable demographic dividend.

Given the changing face of world economies over the past two years, it is important to juxtapose these statistics with the predicted challenges of a post-COVID world. As per an Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) study, the equivalent of five years or more of per capita income would likely be lost by the end of 2021.

The World Bank notes that we would be witnessing deep global recessions fuelled by lowered investments, displacement of human capital owing to lost jobs and schooling, and a disintegration of global trade and supply chains.

Effects of climate change

In addition to this, increased use of non-degradable plastics, bio-medical waste and impediments to ongoing climate repair programmes have further exacerbated climate change deterioration. The effects of an increased use of plastics during the pandemic (which would end up in oceans or landfills) would cost fisheries, tourism and maritime transport industries an additional \$40 billion, according to a UN Environment Program report.

Hence, COVID-19 is an ongoing challenge that is further aggravating bigger concerns like economic recession and climate change. For most countries, these two predicaments would be bigger than the pandemic.

Despite the gloomy outlook, there is a silver lining for India. Let us circle back to the demographic dividend or the economic growth brought on by a change in the structure of a country's population. This leads to an increase in the labour force and, in turn, more people are working and being productive. This accelerates urbanisation and the growth of industries. Also, as the purchasing power of the populace increases, it opens up a bigger domestic market (which is already sizeable in the case of India), thus attracting

more investment and increasing opportunities. Taking these factors into account, the Centre for Economics and Business Research (CEBR) predicts that despite the pandemic, India will become the third largest economy in the world by 2030. Deutsche Bank cements this forecast with their own findings that India's economy will grow to \$7 trillion by 2030 (it is about \$2 trillion now).

The younger the population the more climate-conscious they are. This can simply be explained by younger generations seeing the real-time impact of climate change – from increasing natural disasters to lessening natural resources. This makes them more inclined to act towards a greener tomorrow. A UN report on climate change tells us that close to half a million youth around the world have taken (or are taking) action against climate change through initiatives at their homes, schools and communities.

A decisive 'Future of Work' survey conducted by the Prince's Trust and HSBC claims that 85% of India's youth are interested in a green job as they believe that healing the environment is the only sustainable way forward. When we corroborate this with India's performance on climate change mitigation (one of the top 10 countries to have made substantial efforts towards mitigating climate change), we can fully understand the clout of a younger demographic. The Climate Change Performance Index (CCPI), 2021, puts only two G20 (or Group of Twenty) countries – India and U.K. – in the top 10.

India is often at the forefront of bringing about change. But to continue unhindered on the path of reaping the benefits of the demographic dividend, efforts will have to be made. Inequality is a pressing issue. COVID-19 and the subsequent lockdowns have further deepened this divide. While the Union government has rolled out various subsidies and employment schemes, dominance of the informal economy makes it difficult for all benefactors to reap the benefits.

The need of the hour is for public-private partnership (PPP) models to work in conjunction to bridge the gap. Education and skilling are also key components in enhancing the capabilities of the growing young population and helping them realize their full potential. Moreover, labour-intensive sectors need to be better supported for further job creation.

The rising young population provides India with a great opportunity for growth. To be able to best utilise this boom, policies must ensure that they comprehensively cover all aspects aimed at increasing human development and standards of living.

The author is an actor and is also associated with global NGOs such as the Robin Hood Army