

Empowering youth beyond rhetoric

That Pakistan has a huge youth bulge with over 60 per cent of the population being under 30 years of age is an oft-quoted fact. However, the disparities among youth along socio-economic lines, skill set and therefore opportunities for a comfortable life are less talked about.

Our government is acutely aware of its responsibilities towards all sections of youth, particularly those who need greater support, encouragement and opportunities to succeed in life. The government is taking steps to bring them at par with their more privileged counterparts.

It is important here to contrast our approach from the rhetoric spun by our political rivals. The reality is that Pakistan slipped from 154th position on Youth Development Index in 2016 to 162nd in 2022. Despite tall promises of creating so many jobs that foreign nationals will flock to Pakistan, unemployment increased in the last four years. The literacy rate, which is the building block of a prosperous future, actually fell in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa from 57 per cent to 53 per cent during the PTI's nearly 10 years of rule in the province. Pakistan slipped to second worst country on the Gender Parity Index.

We believe in uplifting the under-privileged youth by drastically increasing opportunities for their education and training and enhancing their employability through internship schemes. We believe that the true potential of young people can only be harnessed through sustained investment in their professional development and well being. Only by prioritizing state investment in young people can we turn Pakistan's youth bulge from a liability into an asset. In an increasingly competitive world only a skilled workforce can create the value-added products and services that the country needs for economic growth, improve macro economic indicators and improve people's lives.

The government has therefore taken up this cause on a war footing. Despite limited fiscal space and the enormous additional constraints posed by unprecedented floods in the country, we have prioritized investing in the

youth. The Ministry of Planning, Development and Reforms aims to contribute towards this cause by including and retaining funding for the following youth focused initiatives in the current year's Public Sector Development Program (PSDP).

First, utilizing the projects funded by the PSDP, we have created space for substantial one year paid internships for 20,000 young engineers. These young luminaries will be hired to help with the ongoing and current development projects being executed all over the country during the current financial year.

We have put together a package for speedy uplift of the poorest 20 districts of Pakistan – mostly from Balochistan and merged districts of erstwhile Fata with an initial investment of Rs40 billion and potential addition of more funds in the light of socio-economic gap analysis. This will help reduce the uneven development in the country and help fast track development in these districts, bringing them at par with the more affluent areas. The emphasis is on deploying an 'outcomes' based approach that transforms these districts into hubs for economic growth in their respective regions with a particular focus on harnessing the potential of young people.

A healthy mind needs a healthy body as well. Young people severely lack recreational and sports facilities in Pakistan. In order to bridge this gap, we will build 250 mini sports complexes nationwide. In this regard, a Rs12 billion project has been launched in PSDP 2022-23 for construction of these mini sports complexes in three years with the aim of increasing accessibility of sports facilities to the youth, thus giving them a chance to be able to compete at the national, and eventually the international, stage.

To tap the best academic talent available in the country and provide it access to the world's top 25 universities, we are initiating 75 National Top Talent Scholarship Programme for students selected for masters and PhD programmes.

Students from low-income families who aspire for higher education but cannot afford for the admission in top universities due to lack of finances will

be particularly prioritized. The idea is to harness and polish our best talent at the best universities in the world.

Lastly, an Innovation Support Project has also been initiated under PSDP 2022-23 for which Rs9 billion have been allocated. Through a board consisting of various industry professionals and financial experts, the government will play the role of venture capitalist to encourage and support the upcoming entrepreneurs of the country who will be able to gain necessary funding for their idea of product or service through the Innovation Support Project.

Young IT professionals as well as women entrepreneurs will be the major target group under this project to kick-start a national drive of entrepreneurship and further push the existing IT exports worth over \$2 billion. This will boost entrepreneurial activity, unlock capital from unproductive uses (such as speculative real estate) and enable the building of a local VC fund sector, critical for the future of start ups and technology in Pakistan.

Under the prime minister's vision for youth development, these programmes will help millions of young people. Only by creating education opportunities through scholarships, skills development through training, internships and entrepreneurial opportunities, ensuring their well-being through sports facilities and fast tracking development of young people in under-developed areas will we truly empower the youth in the country.

The above initiatives are a testament of our commitment and a step towards fulfilling our promise to the youth. If we continue on this trajectory, there is no doubt that together we can Turnaround Pakistan into an enterprising, inclusive and prosperous country.

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