

# The Daily Star

## Reimagining Youth Skills Post-Pandemic

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Thu Jul 15, 2021 12:00 AM

People, many of them young men, wait at a playground in the capital's Siddheswari area to receive help amid the ongoing lockdown to curb Covid-19 transmission, on July 8, 2021. Photo: Anisur Rahman

In a rapidly changing world, the youth are typically the first to adapt. They have been at the forefront of change, leadership and entrepreneurship especially since the advent of the Internet, coming up with creative solutions to modern problems. But even the generally unstoppable youth of this world hit a roadblock during the global catastrophe caused by Covid-19. In Bangladesh alone, nearly 38 million students are missing out on proper learning and peer interactions since the closure of educational institutions in March 2020. As of June 2021, UNESCO estimates that nearly 157 million learners were affected globally due to full school closures in 19 countries.

Meanwhile, ILO estimates that globally, youth employment fell by 8.7 percent last year, which is five percentage points higher than the corresponding figure for older persons in the workforce. In a climate as challenging as the one created by the Covid-19 pandemic, World Youth Skills Day presents the opportunity to put the youth at the centre of our discourse on the recovery of the labour market through skill-building. It also offers us an opportunity to pay tribute to the resilience and creativity of young people around the globe amidst the raging pandemic.

Since July 15 was declared as World Youth Skills Day by the United Nations General Assembly in 2014, this day has provided an opportunity not only for the youth, but also for technical and vocational education and training (TVET) institutions, firms, employers' and workers' organisations, policymakers as well as development partners to engage in much-needed dialogue on preparing young people for the labour market of the future to ensure a more sustainable and equal world.

In Bangladesh, such dialogue and discourse are particularly important, considering that 15 percent of the youth who were employed before the pandemic are presently out of jobs. Those who could retain or regain employment have had to settle for average incomes that are 11 percent below their pre-Covid earnings, according to a study by the Brac Institute of Governance and Development. From a gender perspective, the situation is dire—a third of young women who were employed before the pandemic were already out of jobs in January 2021. Income loss for

women was twice that of men, at 21 percent and 10 percent respectively. Such disparity in terms of impacts not only puts a damper on Bangladesh's progress in the front of gender equality, but also threatens the realisation of several Sustainable Development Goals.

Nearly one-third of the country's population is aged 18-35. These millions of youth could become a demographic dividend in the country's journey towards the SDGs, only if we can provide them with the correct resources and access to opportunities. This World Youth Skills Day, we must understand that Bangladesh's economic recovery in a post-pandemic world largely depends on its youth. In this context, we have to reimagine the role and scope of our digital infrastructure and educational and public institutions to ensure economic recovery and set the right priorities to emerge stronger in a post-Covid world. We must prioritise addressing the fast-growing digital divide that is causing millions of youths to be left behind from economic opportunities.

Following the onset of the pandemic, the government of Bangladesh promptly arranged for classes to be broadcast via television during the school closure, and universities adopted online teaching methods. But multiple studies conducted at different points of the pandemic found a clear digital divide between privileged and lower-income households, with the latter having significantly lower access to television, Internet and alternative learning methods. Recovering from this extreme disruption to education will not be easy, but it's possible with a concerted effort from the government and its development partners. Multiple UNDP projects have been aiding left-behind communities in remote areas to access online education through multimedia set-ups. Learning has to be incentivised for students if needed, and they must be made aware of the importance of digital education and skills training in a rapidly changing, technology-dependent world.

Next, the youth must be given employment opportunities in a variety of sectors. UNDP brought together the government, private sector and development partners as a coalition to accelerate Bangladesh's economic growth by creating decent work and entrepreneurship opportunities for young people. This coalition envisions enabling economic opportunities for all in Bangladesh by 2041. In an increasingly competitive post-pandemic labour market, this coalition aims to enable skill-based employment for Bangladeshi youth.

When it comes to skill-building, the importance of technical and vocational education and training (TVET) cannot be understated. TVET opens up a world of possibilities for the average youth, including the chance of self-employment. Especially during a pandemic when millions of youth are not in education, employment and training, TVET can create opportunities for people of all socioeconomic classes. It is also a major focus of SDG-4, so improving the quality of and access to technical and vocational education will be key to Bangladesh realising the global goals by 2030.

Not only should we encourage our youth to learn new skills, but we should also equip them with the right resources to use those skills in the real world. UNDP is working with the government and partners to co-create a platform for young entrepreneurs and change-makers seeking to improve our digital spaces, while

supporting the start-ups that work towards the SDGs. The government's a2i initiative, supported by UNDP, has been involved in bringing young people's innovative business ideas to life since its inception. Such platforms and initiatives help the youth feel empowered to be at the forefront of the SDGs, while also giving them a chance to contribute to the LDC graduation and other longer-term development aspirations of the country.

Bangladesh's demographic dividend can only be meaningfully realised if the youth are enabled to become future leaders and change-makers. And that can happen only if our society, public and private institutions, and educational institutions make future-focused investments and in turn ensure a quicker recovery from the severe damage that the pandemic has been causing both here and across the globe.

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