ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COMMISSION FOR ASIA AND THE PACIFIC

REVIEW OF THE HUMAN RESOURCES DEVELOPMENT STATUS OF YOUTH IN THE ASIAN AND PACIFIC REGION



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INTRODUCTION

The Asian and Pacific region is home to 659 million young people at the turn of the new millennium, constituting over 60 per cent of the world youth population (table 1). Youth are defined by the United Nations as persons between the ages of 15 and 24 years. According to that definition, youth constitute approximately 17.6 per cent of the total population of the Asian and Pacific region, which is close to the proportion of the youth population in the world (17.5 per cent). The subregions of Asia and the Pacific, however, show varied demographic patterns. In South-East Asia and South and South-West Asia, the youth population constitutes 19.7 and 19.2 per cent of the total population respectively, representing about one fifth of the total population. Young people constitute a relatively smaller percentage of the total population in North and Central Asia (16.7 per cent), the Pacific (15.5 per cent) and East and North-East Asia (15.3 per cent) (table 1).

Table 1. Youth population (age 15-24) in the Asian and Pacific region

	Youth population projection (Thousands)			Percentage of youth to total population		
	2000	2010	2025	2000	2010	2025
World	1062283	1186099	1218827	17.5	17.4	15.4
Asia and the Pacific	658988	729695	697674	17.6	17.4	14.7
East and North-East Asia	227743	243401	201181	15.3	15.4	11.9
South-East Asia	102998	110609	106513	19.7	18.7	15.4
South and South-West Asia	286857	334972	359968	19.2	19.1	17.1
North and Central Asia	36755	35539	24527	16.7	16.5	11.5
Pacific	4635	5173	5484	15.5	15.3	14

Source: United Nations, World Population Prospects: The 2000 Revision.

By 2025 the total number of young people in the region is projected to increase to 697 million, constituting 14.7 per cent of the total population, which is a slightly lower proportion as compared with the year 2000, but which still represents a significant segment of society.

Integration and development of the full potential of youth are of critical importance to the development of the region. The Jakarta Plan of Action on Human Resources Development in the ESCAP Region, adopted by the Commission in 1988 and updated in 1994, thus identifies youth as the priority target group of all human resources development efforts.

In 1995, the General Assembly adopted resolution 50/81 containing the World Programme of Action for Youth to the Year 2000 and Beyond, which covered 10 priority areas: education, employment, hunger and poverty, health, environment, drug abuse, juvenile delinquency, leisure-time activities, girls and young women, and the full and effective participation of youth in the life of society and in decision-making. Out of these 10 areas, four

have been identified as having the most crucial importance for youth in the Asian and Pacific region: education, health, employment and participation of youth in society and decision-making. They were chosen based on the view that youth are a positive force in society whose potential should be fully developed and integrated today, as well as in the future (Second Asia-Pacific Intergovernmental Meeting on Human Resources Development for Youth, Bangkok, June 1998). The present publication thus focuses its discussions on these four regional priority areas.

I. EDUCATION

The world observed the tenth anniversary of the World Declaration on Education for All at the World Education Forum at Dakar in April 2000. The Forum adopted the Dakar Framework for Action, thereby reaffirming the vision of Education for All (EFA). As the Jakarta Plan of Action on Human Resources Development also emphasizes, education and training are the most critical processes for increasing the productivity of human resources. The other key recent regional documents, including the Asian and Pacific position for the Lisbon World Conference of Ministers Responsible for Youth, adopted at the Second Asia-Pacific Intergovernmental Meeting on Human Resources Development for Youth, also promote the concept of "education as a human right" and call for further strengthening of this principle. From these recently adopted international instruments, "access, equity and quality" appear to emerge as the key themes in education in the Asian and Pacific region.

A. Access and Equity

In preparation for the World Education Forum, countries undertook the EFA 2000 assessment exercise to assess achievements since 1990 and identify outstanding challenges. The EFA 2000 assessment results demonstrated that significant progress had been made since 1990 in the world (including the Asian and Pacific region) towards realization of the goal of Education for All (EFA). Primary school enrolment had outpaced the growth rate of the school age population and nearly 400 million children had enrolled by the year 2000, as compared with 331 million in 1990. The regional synthesis report of the EFA 2000 assessment noted that in East Asia and the Pacific, large gains had been made in increasing the enrolment in primary education in nearly every country of the subregion, resulting in close to universal primary school enrolment by the year 2000 (UNESCO, 2000). The report also highlighted the achievements in reduced gender and provincial disparities in that subregion. In South Asia, the enrolment rates increased from around 50 per cent in 1990 to over 70 per cent by 1999.

However, there are new as well as remaining challenges. The Dakar Framework of Action, inter alia, identified HIV/AIDS as the new challenge to EFA and called upon Governments to "make maximum use of education's potential to transmit messages on prevention and to change attitudes and behaviours" regarding HIV/AIDS. The EFA 2000 assessment also revealed that, among the six "target dimensions" of EFA, the efforts in the 1990s had focused on formal primary education enrolment, thus largely bypassing youth and other important target groups of EFA, such as adult women. Furthermore, it is estimated that only 2 to 5 per cent of young persons with disabilities receive any education at all, formal or non-formal. There has been little recognition, in EFA initiatives, of the education rights of children and youth with special needs and of the discrimination, ignorance and physical barriers that they face when trying to gain access to primary and other levels of education programmes. Many young people in the region have thus been deprived of the opportunity to receive the most basic level of education, and many of them run the risk of living the rest of their lives in the darkness of illiteracy.

The World Programme of Action for Youth identified the lack of educational opportunities for the more disadvantaged subgroups of youth: girls and young women, migrants, refugees, displaced persons, street children, indigenous youth minorities, young people in rural areas and young people with disabilities, which also reflects the reality of the Asian and Pacific

region. In particular, it must be noted that 75 per cent of the world's illiterate people reside in South Asia, and literacy rates among women in many countries of the subregion are about half those of their male counterparts. The regional synthesis report on the EFA 2000 assessment noted that gender disparity in favour of males remained a characteristic of the South Asian subregion. Thus, equity continues to be a major concern in the region.

In this context, the importance of non-formal education (NFE) and non-State actors should be recognized. In the past, NFE has often received a diminishing share of the total government education budgets. Paradoxically, this reduction in budgets has coincided with an increasing demand for NFE programmes and services from groups such as children who had dropped out of formal schooling, youth seeking to acquire life skills, migrant workers and their families, and rural women wanting to develop employment related skills.

The Jakarta Plan of Action on Human Resources Development advocates a comprehensive view of education, encompassing the formal education system at all levels as well as lifelong education in the form of adult and continuing education in non-formal settings. The Braga Youth Action Plan adopted at the third World Youth Forum, Braga, Portugal, August 1998, also called on Governments to "recognize and promote the importance of non-formal education, being integral to the full development of individuals and societies and therefore being complementary to formal education". The youth representatives at the Asia-Pacific Youth Forum convened by ESCAP in May 1998 further expressed the need to "provide additional opportunities in non-formal education for the training of young people, not only for the world of work, but also for imparting life skills". Educational opportunities through non-formal education are in demand not only in order to increase the access of the disadvantaged sectors of society to basic education, but also to meet the diverse educational needs of the people in the region at different stages of their lives.

B. QUALITY

The issue concerning quality of education continues to be an important challenge. "Quality" of education, particularly for youth, requires several different levels of discussion. Three different aspects of "quality" are discussed: (a) issues related to problems of dropping out and repetition; (b) the relevance of education to gainful employment; and (c) the usefulness of education as a means of empowerment.

(a) **Issues of repetition and drop-out rates:** The poor quality of teaching staff, the physical environment and teaching materials often discourages students from regular attendance at school and serves to increase drop-out rates. It has been widely observed in the Asian and Pacific region that national education programmes concentrate on enrolment figures and fail to implement remedies for absenteeism, dropping-out and students repeating their grades. The EFA 2000 assessment results noted that many Governments in the region had started to pay attention to the "quality" issue and allocated more resources towards the development of curricula and the training of teachers. Such a trend had been supported by many donor organizations, including United Nations agencies.

(b) **Relevance of education to gainful employment:** The second aspect of concern related to quality is the efficiency and effectiveness of the education system in providing adequate productive human resources to meet the requirements of the rapid socio-economic and technological changes taking place in the region. Under the present rapidly changing needs of the labour market, workers have to be equipped with marketable skills that can be readily acquired. At the Second Asia-Pacific Intergovernmental Meeting on Human Resources

Development for Youth, the region's government representatives committed themselves to "ensuring the linkage and matching of education with the needs of industry, business and the employment market, wherever possible; and setting up extension services and other internship schemes, such as career education orientation, information dissemination programmes and networking, to enable young people to enter employment, as well as to create employment opportunities to meet the requirements of social, economic and technical changes."

(c) **Life skills education**: The increasingly complex challenges faced by youth in the Asian and Pacific region require skills in decision-making and problem-solving. Many young people in the region daily tackle new and intensified challenges, such as the risk of being infected with HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases (STDs), substance abuse and vulnerability to unemployment, war and political instability, discrimination and sexual and other forms of exploitation. In order to protect themselves, young people require skills that enable them to make the right choices.

The multifaceted nature of these challenges is increasingly being recognized. Research shows that merely providing youth with information on, for example, protected sex or the dangers of substance use, is a necessary, but not sufficient, means to prevent and reduce risky behaviour or promote a positive change in behaviour. In particular, simply using a "fatalistic" approach, which focuses on a purely negative message (such as "drugs kill"), has not proved effective. Research also indicates that information-based approaches need to be combined with other approaches to foster attitude change and strengthen interpersonal skills, known as "life skills". Furthermore, research has shown that life skills training, by promoting safer behaviour, has helped young people to reduce their risk of HIV/AIDS infection.

The life skills method recognizes the complexity and challenges that young people face. It moves beyond simplistic messages to discuss issues in a more open manner. It does not tell young people what is right and what is wrong. Rather, through the provision of options and choices, young people are empowered to make the choices that are best for them.

As part of a comprehensive, multi-strategy approach, the life skills method is increasingly being used to help to develop protective behaviour among youth and reduce self-inflicted harm through high-risk or irresponsible behaviour.

The life skills approach encompasses three aspects: knowledge (K), attitudes (A) and skills (S). These three components are combined to provide young people with information, as well as methods of processing and using the information in everyday life. This involves translating knowledge and attitudes into safe and adaptive action.

At the Round Table on Life Skills Education for Youth in the New Millennium, organized by ESCAP and held at Bangkok in January 2000, youth representatives identified four main areas of life skills: (a) interpersonal skills; (b) personal development skills; (c) social awareness skills; and (d) technological skills. The young people emphasized the importance of improving "soft skills", such as attitudes and emotional development, in addition to learning traditional "hard skills" in specific vocational fields. They also noted that life skills were learnt through their peers and the media, not just through the education system.

Life skills training is an essential approach for developing and changing behaviour for the well-being and healthy functioning of all young women and men in the Asian and Pacific region. It is thus desirable for youth development programmes to integrate a component on life skills training and education. Young people should assist in the development, implementation and

monitoring of such programmes, as they themselves know best what type of life skills they need. Formal and non-formal education programmes should emphasize what skills young people need to protect themselves from the risks they face, such as substance abuse and HIV/AIDS. Skills that must be incorporated in curricula include decision-making, communication, negotiation, interpersonal conduct and critical thinking.

(d) **Usefulness of education as a means of empowerment:** Another important aspect of quality of education is the role of education as a means to empower young people. The purpose of education should be more than employment generation; it should be used to promote democracy, good governance and the building of civil society. Youth education is therefore a major instrument for constructive change. Youth education is a binding factor in achieving progress in the areas of health, employment and participation. Furthermore, education, particularly for youth, can contribute to empowerment of women through gender sensitization at various educational levels. There should be a continuous effort to review the quality of education in order to ensure that the full potential of youth can be developed.

In addition, education for youth should aim to nurture new values for them to live in a globalizing world. Today's youth need to grow up as global citizens, irrespective of their place of birth. They need to learn to respect diversity of cultures, religions and ethnicities and to be tolerant of differences, based on a non-discriminating and appropriate knowledge of a range of value systems. Likewise, young people should be encouraged to consider a broader range of possibilities in selecting their own future, including their career options and lifestyles, than what might be considered feasible within more conventional formal education systems. Existing formal education systems in Asia and the Pacific, even the most successful, often pre-select "elites" of society at a young age and unjustly define a narrow range of possible "successes" in life for them.

In this regard, the Braga Youth Action Plan calls on Governments to "analyse and review their formal education policies to incorporate... global citizenship education, emphasizing universal concepts such as peace, human rights, intercultural understanding, environmental protection, sustainable development and gender equity". Education in the future should enable young people to liberate themselves — their ideas, values and options for careers. As indicated above in the section on life skills education, training in such areas as independent thinking, effective communication and consensus-building is essential in preparing young people for effective participation in public affairs.

In summary, enhancement of the quality of education is a major challenge in the Asian and Pacific region, in order to ensure its relevance to gainful employment and its usefulness for assisting young people in their transition to full adulthood and active citizenship. In addition, it should nurture their idealism and creative thinking so that they may become change agents in creating their own future.

II. HEALTH

The health needs of youth living in the Asian and Pacific region are complex and diverse, and in need of urgent attention. Concerns such as unwanted pregnancy, HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) and the rising wave of drug intake in the region justify the call for giving increased attention to this age group. The age between 15 and 24 years is a critical stage in a person's life, representing the transition from childhood to adulthood. During this period, certain decisions that have an impact on an individual's future are made, including whether to stay in school, find employment, initiate sexual relations or try drugs, to name a few.

Despite global calls for action, the barriers to young people's access to information, counselling skills and services related to reproductive health, HIV/AIDS and substance abuse remain. Many young men and women continue to see health services as inaccessible and irrelevant. For sexually active youth, particularly those who are not married, it is often difficult to obtain relevant reproductive health services. Few clinics are designed, or are even willing, to provide services to unmarried young people. Many of them are consequently left with an unmet demand for contraception and other reproductive health services. Adult discomfort with young people's sexuality is almost universal, and there are similar difficulties in speaking about substance abuse openly.

Young people in the region have themselves identified sexual and reproductive health, and HIV/AIDS and substance abuse prevention, as being of great concern to them. At the Second Asia-Pacific Intergovernmental Meeting on Human Resources Development for Youth (ESCAP, 1998), young people attending the Meeting called upon their Governments to provide greater information about these health concerns in an integrated context. Young people attending the World Conference of Ministers Responsible for Youth, held at Lisbon in August 1998, expressed similar views (United Nations, 1998).

A steadily rising number of countries are allocating resources to youth health. What is becoming increasingly clear, however, is that no institution, private or public, can promote youth health and development single-handedly (WHO, 1999). What is also becoming clear is the interlinked nature of youth health concerns and the need for a holistic approach to youth health. As is emphasized in the present publication, this includes the need for an integrated approach to the prevention of HIV/AIDS and substance abuse and the promotion of sexual and reproductive health.

A. Sexual and Reproductive Health, including HIV/AIDS

Youth in Asia and the Pacific are increasingly entering into sexual relations without much knowledge about sexuality, reproduction or contraception, and with little emotional preparation. As young people are tending to marry later than in previous generations, this is placing new demands on young people's sexual behavior.

The fact that relations prior to marriage tend to be unprotected increases the risk of unwanted pregnancy and STDs, including HIV/AIDS, among youth. Young people are increasingly at risk of being infected with STDs. Of the estimated 333 million new cases of STDs that occur in the world every year, at least 111 million occur among youth under the age of 25. By and large, young people do not use STD treatment clinics or seek care until conditions

are severe. While all young people are at risk of contracting STDS, the most vulnerable group is young people of both sexes who are engaged in commercial sex.

The rise in HIV/AIDS infections in Asia and the Pacific adds a new lethal angle to the vulnerability of youth to STDs. By the end of 2000, 6.4 million people were living with HIV/AIDS in the Asian and Pacific region, and the epidemic is rapidly on the rise in many countries. Youth are especially vulnerable to the epidemic and account for over 50 per cent of all new infections. While remarkably high proportions of people of all ages in most countries in Asia and the Pacific know about HIV/AIDS, millions remain vulnerable because they do not know the basic facts.

One third of all births taking place each year, many of which are unplanned or unwanted, are among adolescents. While some girls choose to keep their infants, others may resort to unsafe abortions with little medical care afterwards, which can lead to infections, infertility and even death. The problems of early childbearing are not only biomedical but can also hamper young girls' educational and economic opportunities, perpetuating a cycle of poverty.

B. SUBSTANCE ABUSE

Young people are increasingly at risk of abusing substances. The substances used by youth are usually those that are readily available, including alcohol, tobacco, pharmaceuticals, volatile solvents, illicit drugs and other psychoactive substances. Experimentation with drugs often begins in childhood or adolescence. Substance abuse is on the rise in Asia, and is in particular increasing rapidly among a wider and younger segment of the youth population. In many countries, the age of first experimentation has been decreasing from 18 to 14, or even 12, years of age. It is no longer marginalized youth who are at risk of abusing substances; drugs have permeated all socio-economic levels of society.

The sharp increase in the use of amphetamine-type stimulants (ATS) among youth, in particular in South-East Asia, requires urgent attention. There has been a rise in the use of methamphetamines, a common ATS, among youth—including schoolchildren (UNDCP, 1998). In Thailand, for example, the Office of the Narcotics Control Board estimated a fourfold to fivefold increase in overall use in 1998. The rising trend in youth drug abusers is also evident in the Thai family court system, which saw an increase from 119 to 7,726 cases for methamphetamine possession between 1995 and 1998. Studies throughout South-East Asia indicate that ATS use is becoming socially acceptable among youth.

While the overall regional trend among youth is that of "normalization" of substance abuse, certain subgroups among youth remain particularly at risk. These include marginalized youth living in especially difficult circumstances, such as those living on the street, in deprived communities or with dysfunctional families; those from ethnic minorities; unemployed and migrant working youth; and youth who have been sexually abused and sexually exploited. Among youth in especially difficult circumstances, drug abuse can be "functional," as a mechanism to cope with factors such as exploitation, the demands of their work, sexual abuse, neglect, violence and hunger. Whereas some of these youth may give up abusing substances without permanent damage, for others, it becomes a behavioural pattern with long-term consequences for their health and education.

The mounting drug abuse in the region has led to serious concerns regarding the adverse health and social consequences, including high morbidity and mortality rates and pervasive drug-related crime and violence among youth who engage in illicit activities to support their habit.

C. The Interlinkage between Sexual and Reproductive Health, HIV/AIDS and Substance Abuse

The issues of sexual and reproductive health, HIV/AIDS and substance abuse are interlinked and often have common roots. Access to sexual and reproductive health remains a cornerstone for HIV/AIDS prevention. Young women cannot protect themselves from STDs, including HIV/AIDS, if they lack access to correct and appropriate sexual and reproductive health information. Sexuality education is needed for both young men and women to enable them to negotiate safe sex and make responsible decisions.

There are also numerous links between sexual abuse and sexual exploitation and substance abuse (Howard, 1999). Some young people who use drugs may, for example, engage in sex work for money to buy drugs. Furthermore, some pimps and brothel owners may give drugs to young people to get them to provide sex services and to keep them physically and psychologically dependent so that they stay in such work. Some customers may give young people drugs and have sex with them; and young people may take drugs to cope with sex work or certain sex acts and to forget that they have been involved in sex work.

With increasing numbers of young people injecting drugs, drug-taking is becoming more closely linked with the spread of HIV/AIDS in the Asian and Pacific region. In particular, injecting drug users (IDUs) are at high risk of HIV infection from sharing contaminated needles. As IDUs tend to share needles quite often, without cleaning them, HIV can spread very rapidly through this population. Injecting is a very efficient way of transmitting HIV, and this mode of transmission has proved to be more effective than sexual intercourse. The drug most commonly injected is heroin, but trends vary according to region and country. Amphetamine-type stimulants, "blackwater" opium and a variety of pharmaceuticals are also injected. According to the United Nations International Drug Control Programme (UNDCP), opiate use prevalence may be approaching 1 per cent of the population in Asia above 15 years of age (ESCAP, UNDCP and UNAIDS, 2001).

The injecting drug user poses a threat of HIV infection not only to individuals who engage in substance abuse but also to their partners and community. In much of China, India and Myanmar, more women are infected through sex with drug users than in any other way (ibid.). In Manipur, India, 45 per cent of wives of IDUs were found to be HIV-positive (ibid.). Furthermore, sex is often traded for drugs by IDUs, who report having multiple partners and low condom use. In general, it should be noted that youth under the effect of substances tend to engage more often in unsafe sexual practices, increasing their risk of being infected with STDs, including HIV/AIDS.

III. EMPLOYMENT

While the labour force growth rate in East Asia and the Pacific slowed down during the 1990s (at an average annual growth rate of 1.5 per cent) as compared with the 1980s (2.3 per cent), it grew faster during the 1990s in South Asia (2.5 per cent) than during the 1980s (1.8 per cent) (World Bank, 2000). This demographic situation has strong implications for the youth labour market situation. According to International Labour Organization (ILO) estimates, more than 100 million new jobs will have to be created in the world within the next 20 years in order to provide suitable employment for the growing number of young people in the economically active populations of the developing countries. Youth unemployment is a global phenomenon and the Asian and Pacific region is no exception. This section, therefore, looks into the issue of youth unemployment and examines youth entrepreneurship development, as one means of addressing this daunting issue.

A. YOUTH UNEMPLOYMENT

Youth unemployment and underemployment are global problems. According to ILO, "over 70 million young women and men in the world are unemployed, with young women bearing a disproportionate burden" (ILO, 1999). Globally, "on average, and almost everywhere, for every one unemployed adult, two young persons find themselves without a job" (ILO, 1999). Unemployment in the Asian and Pacific region is also primarily found among youth.

Table 2. Youth unemployment rates compared to overall unemployment rates (%) and share of youth unemployment to total unemployment (%) in selected countries and areas in the Asia-Pacific region

Country or area	Youth unemployment rate (%)*			Ratio of youth unemployment rate to adult unemployment rate*	Share of youth unemployed to total unemployed*
	MF	M	F	MF	MF
Hong Kong, China	5.0	5.6	4.4	2.8	30.9
Indonesia (1996)	...	...	...	...	72.5
Japan	6.6	6.9	6.3	2.3	24.9
Kyrgyzstan (1996)	...	...	...	...	18.7
Pakistan (1995)	9.0	7.6	18.1	2.5	40.9
Philippines	15.7	14.1	18.5	2.8	45.4
Republic of Korea	7.7	9.4	6.6	4.0	34.4
Russian Federation (1996)	...	...	...	...	26.9
Singapore	5.1	4.5	5.6	2.5	28.6
Sri Lanka (1995)	24.7	20.2	31.2	4.1	54.6
Thailand	2.2	2.5	1.8	4.0	50.4

Source: International Labour Organization, "Employing youth: promoting employment-intensive growth", report for the Interregional Symposium on Strategies to Combat Youth Unemployment and Marginalization", Geneva, December 1999.

*The statistics are as of 1997 unless otherwise noted.

According to the recent statistics, in a number of countries and areas in the region, youth unemployment rates are three to four times higher than adult unemployment rates, constituting over 30 per cent of total unemployment in the countries and areas concerned (table 2). In some extreme cases, such as the cases of Indonesia and Sri Lanka, youth unemployment constituted 72.5 and 54.6 per cent, respectively, of total unemployment in 1996. Furthermore, while more studies are required, the recent experience of the financial and economic crisis in South-East Asia appeared to have "demonstrated that youth are more vulnerable to external shocks ... since they are the first ones to be retrenched and face greater difficulties in finding employment" (ILO, 1999). This echoes the results of many studies that have shown that young people are not only more likely to quit their jobs voluntarily but are more likely to be fired and that they are the last ones to be re-recruited. This is because the opportunity cost to firms of firing young workers are lower than of firing older workers for various reasons, including provisions of employment protection legislation.

Considerable concern has been expressed in recent years about the rising level of unemployment among the educated. Among youth, unemployment affects both the educated and the uneducated. In fact, according to ILO, "unemployment rates are generally higher for the more educated than the less educated" in Asia (ILO, 1999). For example, in Indonesia, among rural male unemployed adolescents (15-19 years old), more than one third have completed primary schooling, more than one third have a junior high school degree and about one fifth possess a senior high school degree. In this regard, the issue of "mismatch" of education and labour market requirements, as discussed in section I of this publication, is noteworthy. However, it is also important to note the fact that rural young people, who are less educated and less skilled than their urban counterparts, are uprooted from the traditional system of support. Consequently, they are exposed to the lowest ranks of the industrial hierarchy and have little say in matters affecting their working life. They make up the subgroup that has become the most adversely affected by the technological advancement in the urban industrial sector.

In addition, an important feature is that unemployment in most of the developing countries in the region is predominantly an urban phenomena and that underemployment is the main problem in rural areas (ILO, 1999). For example, a much higher proportion of underemployed young men, women and persons are found: (a) in rural Indonesia, 45.2, 60.5 and 50.9 per cent, respectively, compared with 23.5, 23.8 and 23.7 per cent for their urban counterparts; and (b) in agriculture and allied activities in the Philippines, 52, 70 and 55 per cent, respectively, compared with 9, 15 and 13 per cent among service workers, and 13, 12 and 12 per cent among production and related workers (ILO, 1999).

Some of the serious consequences of youth unemployment in the region must be reiterated.

First, unemployment among youth in the region has serious implications on the household, given the early age of marriage prevailing in many countries of the region. For example, nearly 80 per cent of women and 40 per cent of men in South Asia, and some 50 per cent of women and 30 per cent of men in South-East Asia are married by the age of 24.

Second, unemployment tends to make people unhappy and creates a wide range of social ills that have damaging effects on young people, including the lack of skills development, low self-esteem, marginalization and impoverishment. Such problems have become particularly serious in urban unemployment in many developing countries of the Asian and Pacific region because urban unemployment victimizes rural youth migrants first and brings added insecurity, rootlessness and frustration to this vulnerable subgroup.

Third, prolonged unemployment can result in serious implications for the human resources development of the young through factors which aggravate the prospects of employability of those individuals such as the loss of skills, weakening of morale and psychological damage. Even worse, economic despair among the young can result in their involvement in illegal activities, such as drug trafficking and commercial sex work. Actions to address youth unemployment are thus urgently required.

B. YOUTH ENTREPRENEURSHIP DEVELOPMENT

Disturbingly, economic growth is not always accompanied by an expansion in employment opportunities, while stagnation of the economy almost always results in a smaller number of jobs available. How can countries ensure the creation of a greater amount of "decent work" for young people? The Jakarta Plan of Action on Human Resources Development advocates policies on labour-utilizing investment, including policies which support informal sector activities and small-scale and cottage industries, pointing out the importance of promoting self-employment and entrepreneurship. Yet not every young person can become an entrepreneur; thus entrepreneurship development is not the sole answer in addressing the issue of youth unemployment.

Nonetheless, young entrepreneurs need to be encouraged and supported as one important avenue of securing jobs for themselves as well as possibly creating more jobs for their peers, when successful. Existing barriers such as difficulties in access to credit should be removed. In this regard, some youth organizations in the region have been successful in nurturing young entrepreneurs, as in the case of the All-China Youth Federation (ESCAP, 2000).

IV. PARTICIPATION

By adopting the Braga Youth Action Plan, more than 400 young people representing youth organizations from 150 countries and representatives of the United Nations and intergovernmental organizations underlined that the participation of youth is a prerequisite for the overall development of society. The strongest demand of young people, clearly reflected throughout the Braga Youth Action Plan, is that they want to be considered as full and equal citizens, and as serious and reliable partners in the conception, planning and implementation of policies and programmes in their community and society, and also those that impact on youth as a target group.

The Braga Youth Action Plan emphasizes that youth should participate in political decision-making at all levels and that young people must be supported to organize themselves in order to fully participate in political, economic, social and cultural life. Stating that young people must be seen as actors in today's society who have direct stakes in the development process, the Braga Youth Action Plan specifies goals and actions to be taken on youth policies, participation and human rights. The implementation of the recommendations resulting from the Braga Youth Action Plan requires that youth issues be moved up in national policy agendas and be mainstreamed into all policy-making.

Youth participation can be defined as "a process through which youth influence and share control over initiatives and the decisions and resources that affect them" (ESCAP, 1999b). This section discusses the two elements of youth participation as identified under the World Programme of Action for Youth, namely, "participation of youth in society" and "participation of youth in decision-making".

A. YOUTH PARTICIPATION IN SOCIETY

The underlying premise of youth participation is that by encouraging youth to participate more fully in society, youth are encouraged to be more knowledgeable on their rights and become more responsible citizens. It is envisaged that once young people have the opportunity to realize their potential, be respected by society and fully participate in their community, consistent with their human rights and responsibilities, society at large will benefit. The notion of the participation of youth in society must start with ensuring the access of all young people to appropriate services including education and health to guarantee their human resources development.

The benefits of youth participation and empowerment are numerous (Save the Children, 1997):

1. It provides a level of influence and choice about the types of services and helps young people to clearly understand their own desires and needs;

2. It provides an exploration of youth's own potential;

3. It provides opportunities to acquire skills in debate, communication, negotiation and individual or group decision-making and to learn how individuals, groups and even national politics work;

4. It encourages young people to be active in creating the services they use, rather than being passive consumers of services provided for them, and highlights that any such service must be an agent for social change and not for social control;

5. It enhances services that reflect the interests and problems defined by young people. Young people can bring new perspectives, influencing outcomes in new and unexpected ways. Policies and programmes incorporating young people in their design and delivery are likely to be more efficient, effective and recognize the needs of the young people;

6. It helps to prepare young people to participate in wider societal decision-making;

7. It can improve the image of youth and challenge any negative stereotypes of young people perpetuated in the community;

8. It promotes the use of open and accountable services, which encourages respect for democratic principles.

It must be noted that there is a varying degree, and thus varying quality, of participation. The spectrum of participation can be recognized at five levels: (a) non-participation, (b) passive involvement, (c) influence, (d) partnership and (e) self-mobilization. It is important to look at youth participation as a process, whereby young people gradually increase control over their own environment and move from the lower level of the participation spectrum to the higher level. The participation of young people is taking place in varying degrees in numerous projects and programmes throughout the region (ESCAP, 1999b).

Considerable progress has been made in the development of such tools as peer education, peer counselling, young people as researchers and young people in advocacy. Some projects and programmes involve youth in all aspects, including: analysing needs and setting objectives, information and communication, decision-making, administration, design and implementation of activities, advocacy, service, support and education, staff and monitoring and evaluation. Yet it must be noted that, in the region, such instances of genuine youth participation exist as exceptions rather than as the rule.

B. Participation of Youth in Decision-Making

As the World Programme of Action for Youth states, the progress of society depends, to a considerable extent, on its capacity to incorporate the contribution and responsibility of young people in the building and designing of its future. In addition to mobilizing the capacity of youth for supporting today's development policies, their unique perspectives of the immediate future need to be taken into account in the formulation of long-term policies. The economic, social and political participation of youth largely conditions the effectiveness of actions proposed in the World Programme of Action for Youth. As the Jakarta Plan of Action on Human Resources Development advocates, both the means and the results of development should be people-centred and young people should be given an appropriate position in society to allow them to express their views on the improvement of the social, economic and cultural aspects of society. Policies should be geared towards creating an atmosphere among young people that provides possibilities for bringing about improvements in their own lives and for the future of society as a whole.

One avenue of promoting youth participation in decision-making at the national level is through the participatory formulation process of youth policy. A number of countries in the region developed their youth policies through extensive consultations with, and participation of, young people. This has been notable in Bangladesh, Malaysia and the Maldives:

(a) Bangladesh: Implemented the "youth issue and opportunity" workshop programme that eventually involved over 560 workshops from the subdistrict to national levels and a set of sectoral workshops targeting priority issues (employment, training and education, self-development, drug health issues, environment, culture, participation and migration);

(b) Malaysia: The new National Youth Development Policy, proposed and drafted by the Malaysian Youth Council, went through a process of several years of brainstorming, consultation, negotiation, review and feedback among the parties concerned, including the Ministry of Youth and Sports and the National Youth Consultative Committee. The Policy was ultimately adopted and approved by the Cabinet in 1998;

(c) Maldives: Conducted participatory planning workshops involving all key government and non-government agencies, in which each group was represented by at least a two-person team, which included at least one member within the youth target age group.

To ensure youth participation in society and decision-making, society as a whole needs to be prepared to change its conventional view and recognize young people as fellow citizens, and acknowledge that they have the right to participate fully in the social, cultural, political and economic development of their country. Policy makers need to recognize that programmes and policies should be designed to: (a) ensure young people's full participation, including consideration of advisory and management roles for youth; and (b) provide youth with the power to influence the outcome of different situations.

Furthermore, attention needs to be given to guaranteeing the participation of all youth. Equity needs to be ensured for females and males, youth of varying levels of mental and physical abilities and all ethnic, national or religious groups. In addition, subgroups of youth that may require special attention, including rural youth, street children, young women and young people with HIV/AIDS, should not be forgotten.

V. CONCLUSION

Youth represent a tremendous resource with great potential for the future of the Asian and Pacific region. To invest in these important human resources is to invest in the future. As the senior officials responsible for youth in Asia and the Pacific noted with concern in 1998 at an ESCAP meeting, the majority of youth in the region still live in poverty, which prevents them from gaining adequate access to basic educational opportunities and health services. Such a situation, in turn, leads to a limited participation of youth in society in general.

In particular, disadvantaged groups of young people, notably rural youth and young girls as well as other marginalized groups of youth, suffer from limited access to these essential human resources development opportunities to realize their potential and to pursue their aspirations. Such a situation among youth is synonymous with preventing the realization of their potential. Young people deserve a central position in human resources development policies and programmes.

The four priority areas for youth as discussed in the present publication, namely, education, health, employment and participation of youth in society and decision-making, are considered basic and yet of strategic importance. Without sufficient progress in these fundamental areas, further achievements are considered difficult. In this regard, policy makers should be mindful of the fact that more efforts should be made to gather and analyse updated information in these areas. The challenges are significant without any doubt, though by no means insurmountable. What is needed is genuine commitment on the part of policy makers to join hands with young people in tackling them.

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