

## Adolescents and Youth in South Asia: A Force to Reckon With

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*“The future of our nation depends on the worth, capabilities and motivation of today’s youth. Therefore, I will not rest until I have given you the inspiration, knowledge and skills so that you will not only fulfill your own aspirations but be of immense worth to the nation. This is my sacred duty. A strong motivated young Bhutan guarantees a strong bright future.*

*The future is neither unseen nor unknown. It is what we make of it. What work we do with our two hands today will shape the future of our nation. Our children’s tomorrow has to be created by us today.”*

The above excerpt from His Majesty Jigme Khesar Namgyel Wangchuck’s address to the nation on the occasion of Coronation Day in 2008 highlights not only the importance, but also the urgency of building the human capital of children and young people today, so that they contribute to the development of the community, society and the nation.

The global discourse on young people—their needs, their aspirations and the challenges they face—is not new. However, of late, there is a remarkable shift in the way these aspirations and needs are understood, expressed and acted upon. Today, young people know that they can make a difference—to their own lives, to their communities and to their countries.

This article discusses what the “demographic dividend” really means to the world and, in particular, in the South Asian context. Noting the important developments in the field of adolescents and youth, the article enunciates some of the aspirations of youth, and the key priority actions that will enhance the capacities of young people. The article concludes by underlining the need to acknowledge the contributions made by young people to the overall development of their communities and societies.

## Youth in South Asia: The Power of the Millions

According to the United Nations there are about 1.8 billion young people in the age group 10–24 years<sup>1</sup>, the largest ever in the history of the world. The Population Division of the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs states that, in 2012, the Asia and Pacific region had 432 million adolescents aged 12–17, and 521 million youth aged 18–24<sup>2</sup>. In the South Asian region alone, there are over 329 million adolescents (10–19 years)—a whopping 20 percent of the total population of the region<sup>3</sup>.

Youth are considered the future, the energy that needs to be harnessed for a better tomorrow, and to power the growth engine of countries in the South Asian region. Undoubtedly, it is young people who contribute significantly to ensuring a surge in economic growth. A quick look at the population trajectory of the South Asian region shows that the ratio of working-age (15–64 years) to non-working age populations is on an upward curve, and will continue to be so until the 2040s, when it will start declining. David Bloom and others, in a Harvard Working Paper series published in 2011, state that this ratio is a crucial indicator of a region's potential to reap its demographic dividend<sup>4</sup>. Their analysis also shows that the impetus for economic growth is faster when the ratio of working-age to non-working age population is higher and grows at a faster pace.

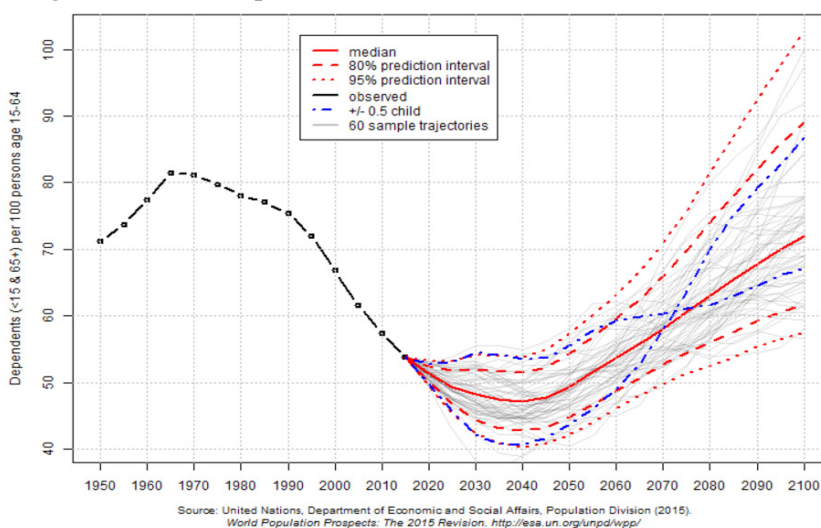


Figure: South Asia's Demographic Curve<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1</sup><http://www.un.org/youthenvoy/2015/04/10-things-didnt-know-worlds-population/>

<sup>2</sup>UNDESA, 2012; World Population Monitoring – Adolescents and Youth, A Concise Report

<sup>3</sup>UNICEF, State of the World's Children report 2015

<sup>4</sup>Bloom, David et al, Demographic Change and Economic Growth in South Asia, Harvard School of Public Health, 2011 ([https://cdn1.sph.harvard.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/1288/2013/10/PGDA\\_WP\\_67.pdf](https://cdn1.sph.harvard.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/1288/2013/10/PGDA_WP_67.pdf))

<sup>5</sup><https://esa.un.org/unpd/wpp/Graphs/Probabilistic/TDR/0-14and65plus/15-64/>

The graph on the previous page clearly shows that, until the 2040s, the South Asian region will have more persons in the working age population than in the non-working age populations, thereby lowering the dependency ratios. The advantage of population growth is a predisposing positive condition prevalent in the South Asian region. However, for this positive population growth to translate into overall development, powered by economic growth, would mean increased investment in building a cadre of young people who are ready to utilise opportunities.

Investments in education, vocational and technical training, and in ensuring a healthy and well-informed young population will be crucial. While another several decades will provide the region an opportunity to capitalise on this demographic dividend, scientists argue that investment in children and young people will be most crucial during this period to prepare future generations to deal with increasing dependency ratios and reduced human capital resulting from declining fertility rates.

### **Youth Employment: Challenges and Opportunities**

There are universal concerns related to the staggering rates of youth unemployment. The economic and social development of countries depends to a great extent on the skills and capacities of their young citizens. A 2016 information sheet from the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) suggests that 65 percent of today's children will have jobs that have not been invented yet<sup>6</sup>. This is an important observation and means that our skills development programmes will have to be future-oriented and innovative.

A majority of children in South Asia are now attending and completing primary school, but entering and completing secondary education and access to tertiary education continue to be a challenge for the region. Completion of secondary education, coupled with diverse technical and vocational skills programmes, will be the key to ensuring that youth have the skills for the future.

Entrepreneurship has traditionally been the domain of a few, but without exception, youth from all social strata in the South Asian region have demonstrated over the last decade that they have the ability to run their own businesses. "Business idea" is what matters and children as young as 12 and 13 years have shown their mettle in the areas of software development, mobile applications and so on.

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<sup>6</sup><https://www.oecd.org/internet/ministerial/i-Sheet-OECD-Observer-Digital.pdf>

## Second Decade: A Second Chance

Researchers the world over have increased their focus on the second decade of life. A 2016 Lancet report<sup>7</sup> highlights the critical nature of this second decade, i.e., adolescence, when children undergo rapid physical growth and sexual maturation, coupled with emotional, social and cognitive development. Recent evidence<sup>8</sup> on brain development indicates that, when it comes to substantial neurological development, the second decade is second only to early childhood. This means that countries must invest more resources in adolescents and youth. While programmes for adolescent health, employability and life skills are well established across the region, there is limited investment in building adolescents' cognitive capital.

The rapidly growing information technology landscape of the region provides the unique opportunity to reach adolescents with knowledge and information. E-learning platforms can bridge barriers to access quality education for adolescents in rural and urban areas. At the same time, Internet and social media platforms can play a vital role in connecting young people with each other to share business plans and develop a community of entrepreneurs.

## Of Sound Body, of Sound Mind

There is a significant body of research highlighting the problems faced by young people, especially in the areas of physical and mental health. Global evidence shows that the strongest determinants of adolescent health are structural factors such as national wealth, income inequality and access to education and employment<sup>9</sup>. A recent WHO study underlines self-harm (including suicide) as one of the main causes of adolescent mortality in the South-East Asia region<sup>10</sup>. With some exceptions, in many South Asian countries, the lack of sexuality education can lead to risky sexual behaviour among young people. Likewise, limited opportunities for counselling and other youth support services expose them to other risky behaviours like substance use.

An important challenge in addressing these problems is the absence of facilities that are designed with due consideration for the problems faced by youth, and their need for privacy and confidentiality. Non-judgmental attitudes by service providers towards youth can significantly increase the uptake of services designed

<sup>7</sup>Patton et al. Our future: a Lancet commission on adolescent health and wellbeing. The Lancet, London, 2016.

<sup>8</sup>UNICEF Symposium: The Adolescent Brain: A Second Window of Opportunity. May 2016

<sup>9</sup>Lancet 2012; 379;1641- *Adolescence and the social determinants of health*

<sup>10</sup>WHO; Health for the World's Adolescents: A Second Chance in the Second Decade; May 2014

for them. Increasingly, countries in the region are implementing adolescent-focused programmes such as “adolescent friendly health services” which offer safe spaces for young people to seek information and advice, as well as treatment.

### **Youth: A Gendered Experience**

Not surprisingly, gender plays a key role in youth empowerment and development. The South Asian region continues to face the challenges posed by gender norms and stereotypes. Girls in many countries in the region fare poorly in terms of completing primary education, are married off while they are still children, and experience child bearing at an early age. The nutritional status of adolescent girls in the region is dismal and adolescent anaemia continues to remain a challenge. Gender stereotypes in terms of what men and women should do also limit opportunities for young women.

There is a need to consciously consider the gendered nature of skills and opportunities. This will help ensure that national programmes for education and skill-building avoid reinforcing stereotypes and usher in equal opportunities for men and women in employment and entrepreneurship. The role of young women in civic and political participation is equally crucial. While the region has produced many women leaders including heads of states and heads of governments, women’s engagement at the local level of governance and civic engagement needs to be further strengthened.

### **Acknowledging and Celebrating the Contributions of Youth**

More often than not, the discourse on youth is futuristic in nature—about a bright future if everything goes right or a dark one if not enough attention is paid to their concerns. This has resulted in the significant neglect of present youth—what young people can do today and what they *are* doing today. The social and economic contributions young people make all around us are rarely acknowledged for multiple reasons. One of the important reasons is that a majority of youth, especially adolescents, are not a recognised group of citizens with the power of the vote. The other reason for this lack of acknowledgment is the economic measure of productivity, where employment, or the lack of it, plays a significant role.

The technology landscape of the South Asian region is changing at a rapid pace. Increasing numbers of young people now have access to mobile phones and the Internet. This has led to improved connectivity not only among the youth, but also between youth and policymakers. Organisations such as Video Volunteers ([www.videovolunteers.org](http://www.videovolunteers.org))

[videovolunteers.org](http://videovolunteers.org)) are using innovative approaches like video journalism to engage youth from diverse rural and urban locations to raise important issues related to their communities.

Technology is also providing platforms for young people to direct regular feedback to service providers and policymakers by using tools such as U-Report. A small-scale text-based innovation of UNICEF that started in Uganda now has over one million active young users across 15 developing countries<sup>11</sup>.

### **Bhutan: A Glowing Example of Celebrating the Contributions of Youth**

Over the last few years, the Royal Government of Bhutan and a host of civil society organisations have taken numerous steps to act on this Royal Command through various programmes in the areas of education, vocational training, youth entrepreneurship and volunteerism among others. Democracy, in its nascent stage is also proving to be an exciting platform for young people. They are actively participating in civic engagement initiatives such as community mapping, Youth Initiative, My Gakidh Village and Happy Green Cooperative, and are proving to be change-makers.

### **In Conclusion**

While we have miles to go, and the road ahead is full of possibilities and opportunities, the moment to seize is now. Increased investment in young people's health, education, as well as training and skills-building will be key to ensure that adolescents and youth are equipped to play their part in the development of the South Asian region. At the same time, it is important to ensure that adolescents and youth engage more actively in democratic processes, and that their voices are consistently sought and considered while developing policies and programmes that affect them.

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<sup>11</sup>[https://www.unicef.org/media/media\\_82583.html](https://www.unicef.org/media/media_82583.html)