

THE IMPACT OF YOUTH BULGE ON SOUTH ASIA: LESSONS FOR BANGLADESH

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INTRODUCTION

‘Youth bulge refers to a cohort of youth between the ages of 15 and 24 that is unusually large relative to the adult population in a society’ (Hart 2004:591). The term was coined by German social scientist Gunnar Heinsohn in the mid-1990s where he thinks that a youth bulge occurs when 30 to 40 percent of the males of a nation belong to the ‘fighting age’ cohorts from 15 to 29 years of age. Demographers argue that developing countries undergoing “demographic transition” or those moving from high to low fertility and mortality rates - are especially vulnerable to civil conflict. A large proportion of young adults and a rapid rate of growth in the working-age population tend to exacerbate unemployment, prolong dependency on parents, diminish self-esteem, and fuel frustrations (Cincotta quoted in Beehner 2007: para. 3). So-called “youth bulges” have been for many years a key concern in development given the implications for labour markets, government budgets, cultural norms and overall economic growth in countries where economic stagnation and unemployment are major problems (Jimenez, Emmanuel & Mamta 2006:43).

In the early 1990s, awareness of the security dimensions of youth bulges took on a new prominence as policy makers worried about the potential turmoil to be caused by large numbers of unemployed young people particularly young men growing listless and alienated from their society. More recently, youth bulges have become a popular explanation for current political instability in the Arab world and for recruitment to international terrorist networks. A good number of demographers suggest that youth often play a prominent role in political violence, and the ‘existence of a “youth bulge” has historically been associated with times of political crisis’ (Goldstone 1991 quoted in Urdal 2011:1). ‘A recent demographic and political trend shows that countries with a large proportion of young adults in the working-age population are much less likely to attain a stable liberal democracy than countries with a more mature age structure’ (Cincotta 2009:online). The bulge has the potential to create a demographic dividend in the right policy environment. On the other hand, it can contribute to the economic and political instability and violence in the society.

The demography of the countries of South Asian region is changing fast. Among this huge population almost half of them are youth, giving rise to a huge youth bulge for the first time in the history. This is one of the poorest regions of the world after the Sub Saharan African nations. Similar political culture and demographic profile prevails in most of the counties of South Asia. A general statistical relationship between age structure and political violence can also be identified in this region. Not addressing the issues young people face today can result in adverse economic, social, and political consequences. Governments and policy makers across the region are looking at youth issues, mainly education and employment, and their impact on the countries' development.

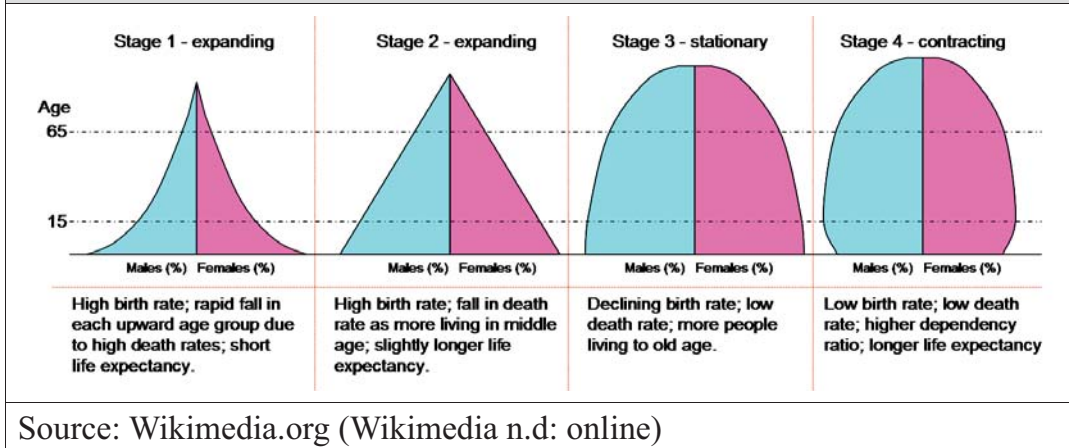
Bangladesh is already showing the symptoms of youth bulge effects in the political and development arena. 'More than 40-50% of the Bangladeshi population is now under the age of 24, with a significant bulge cantered on the cohorts aged between 15 and 24' (BBS 2012: 3). This section of society can become a game-changer for Bangladesh and the entire region. However, if their voice is ignored and their issues not addressed, it will not be long before their despondency turns into a mass revolt. Depending on the conditions, this huge cohort of young people can prove to be a challenge as well, either leading to conflict and violence or opening the window to new opportunities.

SOCIO- ECONOMIC AND POLITICAL IMPLICATIONS OF YOUTH BULGE

How Youth Bulge Builds Up in Demography

A total fertility rate of 2.1 represents replacement level and above 2.1 will lead to population growth and to a youth bulge. Phillip Okull explained in a study conducted for National Council of Churches of Kenya (NCCCK) 'the most popular Transition Model was done by the American demographer Warren Thompson in 1929. Thompson's demographic transition model (DTM) acknowledges that in developed countries this transition began in the eighteenth century and continues today' (Okul 2012:5). Less developed countries began the transition later and are still in the midst of earlier stages of the model. As shown, the model has four stages.

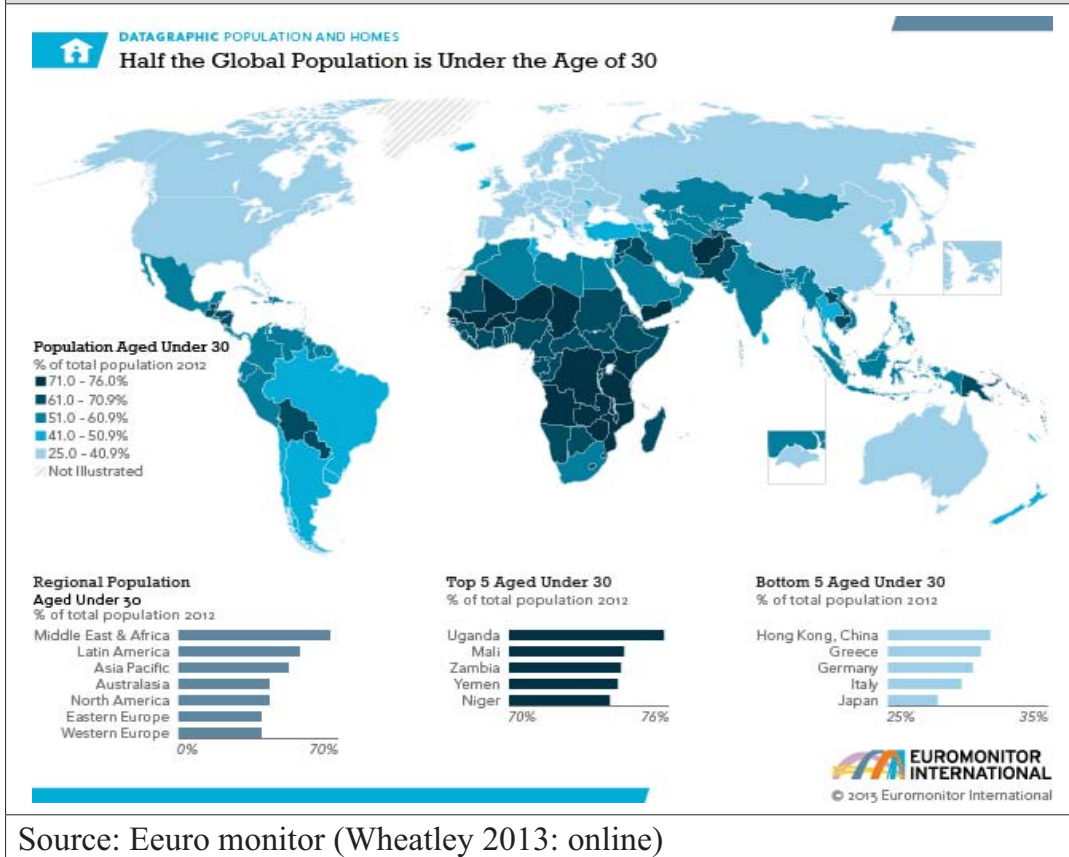
Figure 1: Demographic transition models



Significance of Demographic Profile on Development

Changing demography has a stressful effect on the total state resources. A youth bulge in any country represents a net drain on the immediate finances and short-term productivity of society. When the demographic bulge is young it initially posits clear requirements for education and social management of a volatile age requiring economically “unproductive” drawdown of state funds (Fuller 2003:9). Unfortunately, the challenges in both education and employment are severe and progress is limited (Cabras 2010: para. 29). The rapid growth of population poses challenges at multiple levels of state infrastructure, among them education, water, jobs, housing, and social services. Municipal governments in the least-developed countries are often the least able to muster the human and financial resources to contend with these problems, especially when the poorest, non-taxable segment of the urban population continues to grow rapidly’ (Lisa Mastny 2003: para 14).

Figure.2: Global Population Age Distribution



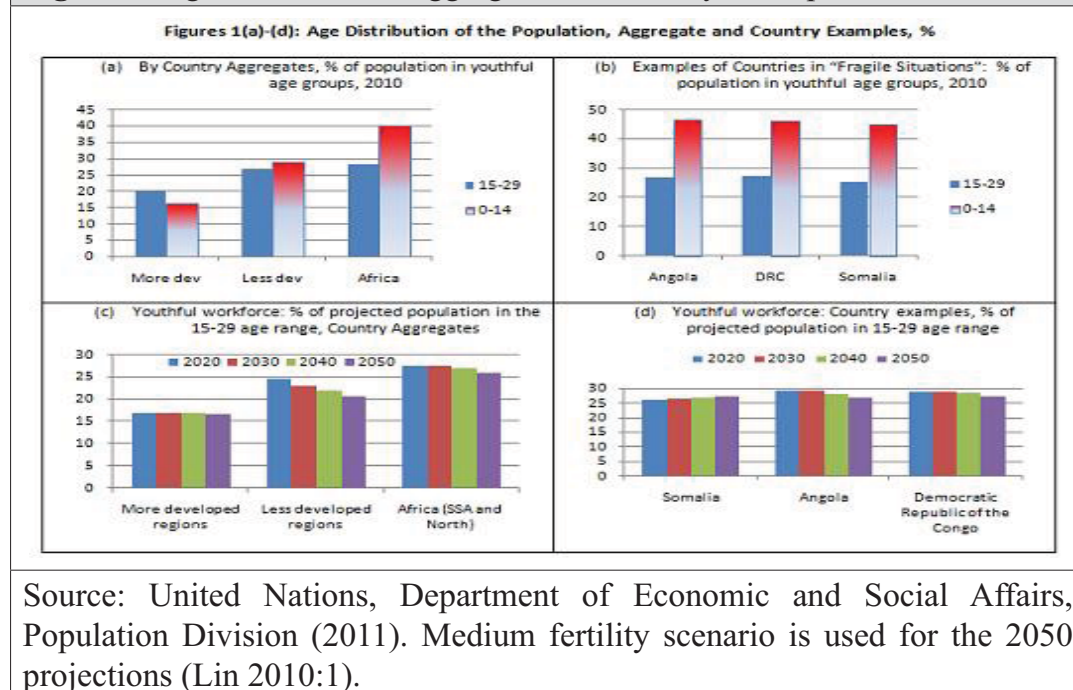
Source: Euro monitor (Wheatley 2013: online)

Security Implications of Youth Bulging Societies

Mere existence of an extraordinary large pool of youth is a factor that lowers the cost of recruitment since the opportunity cost for a young person generally is low (Collier, 2000:94). According to 'cohort size' hypothesis; other things being constant, the economic and social fortunes of a cohort tend to vary inversely with its relative size (Machunovich 2000:236). The influence of the size of youth cohorts on unemployment is also emphasized in the motive-oriented literature on civil violence (Moller 1968:249). There is an association between high proportions of youth in the population and a rise in political violence, civil unrest, state repression, and state militancy (Leahy et al. 2007; Urdal, 2006; Mesquida & Wiener, 1996). Youth bulges facilitate the political mobilisation and recruitment of young adults - particularly young men - by non-state and state-supported organisations capable of political or criminal violence (Fuller 2003:2).

‘The socio-economic problems associated with “youth bulges” may provide fertile ground for recruitment to terrorist organizations’ (Lia 2005:141). Following graph (Figure 3) shows that the conflict ridden countries have significant youth bulge in the demography.

Figure 3: Age Distribution, Aggregate and Country Example



Effects of Youth Bulge on Liberal Democracy Practices

Countries with a large proportion of young adults in the working-age population are much less likely to attain a stable liberal democracy than countries with a more mature age structure (Cincotta 2009:11). Richard believes that clues to the relationship between the youth bulge and liberal democracy can be seen in the wake of demographic changes that swept through much of East Asia and Latin America in the late 1980s and 1990s

Several empirical studies on regime type and civil conflict have found that when large youth groups aspiring to political positions are excluded from participation in the political processes, they may engage in violent conflict behaviour in an attempt to force democratic reform’ (Goldstone, 2001, p. 84 –108). ‘The potential for radical mobilization for terrorist organizations is argued to be greater when large educated youth cohorts are barred from social mobility by autocratic and patriarchic forms of governance’ (Lia 2005:147). By dividing

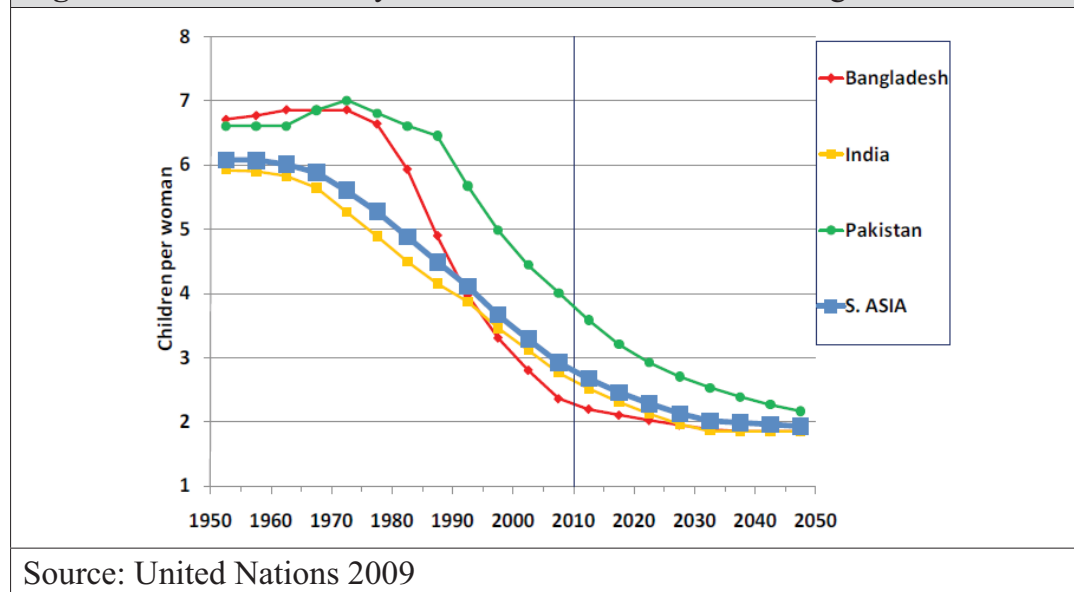
the world into five regions and analyzing data every five years beginning in 1975, it was found that as the regional average of the proportion of young adults declined, the number of liberal democracies grew (Cincotta:2009). This provided a fair indication, plus or minus a decade, of when a country will become a stable liberal democracy.

YOUTH BULGE IN SOUTH ASIA

Demographic Transition in South Asia

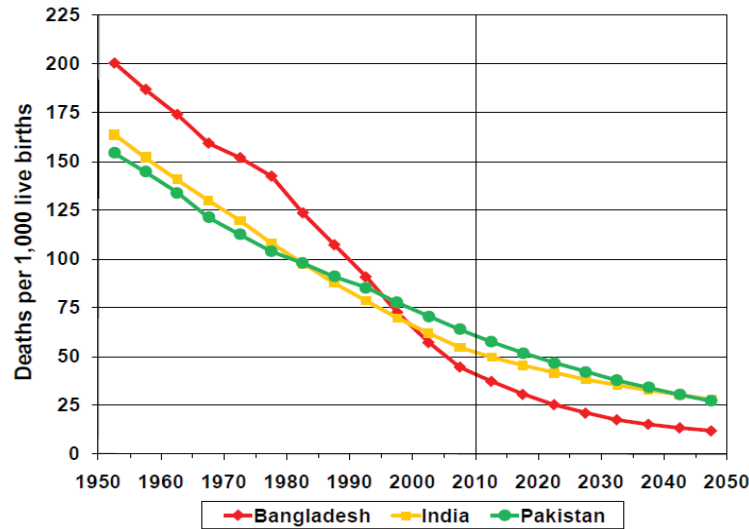
South Asian countries have progressed through the demographic transition at altering paces. ‘In particular, fertility decline, a major component of the transition, has occurred throughout the region, but its time of initiation and pace has differed from one country to another. The historical and projected patterns of fertility rates for South Asian countries are shown in Figure 4. Although the general pattern is the same for most of the countries, Afghanistan, Maldives, and Sri Lanka stand out for their differences. South Asia will not reach Sri Lanka’s 2005 ratio until 2035 (Bloom et al 2011:5).

Figure 4: Rates of Fertility Decline across South Asia’s Large Countries



Declines in Infant Mortality Rates (IMR) are the first stage of the demographic transition. Figure 5 shows South Asia’s three largest countries (Bangladesh, India, and Pakistan) trends in IMR, including UN projections through 2050.

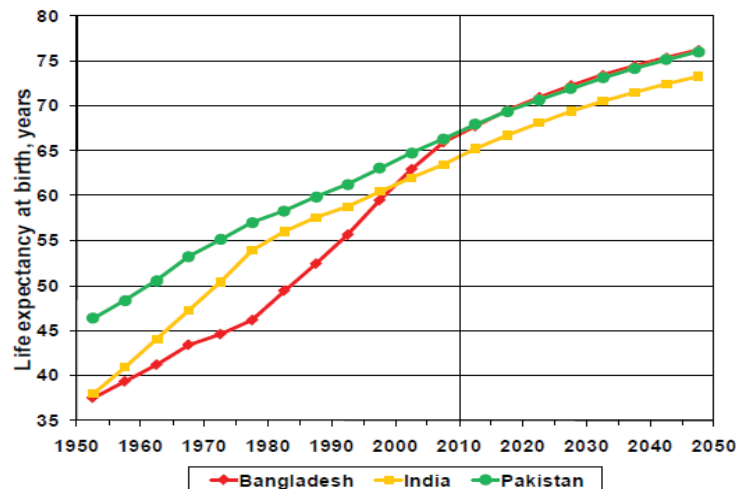
Figure 5: Declining IMR: India, Bangladesh, Pakistan



Source: United Nations 2009

A related indicator of declining mortality is raising life expectancy (Figure 6). The rise in life expectancy seen in all three countries reflects increases in survival probabilities at all stages of the life cycle. The most dramatic rise has been in Bangladesh, with an increase of more than thirty years since the middle of the last century. UN projects a substantial continuing rise nearly an additional ten years before 2050 (Bloom et al 2011:10).

Figure 6: Steady Rise in Life Expectancy

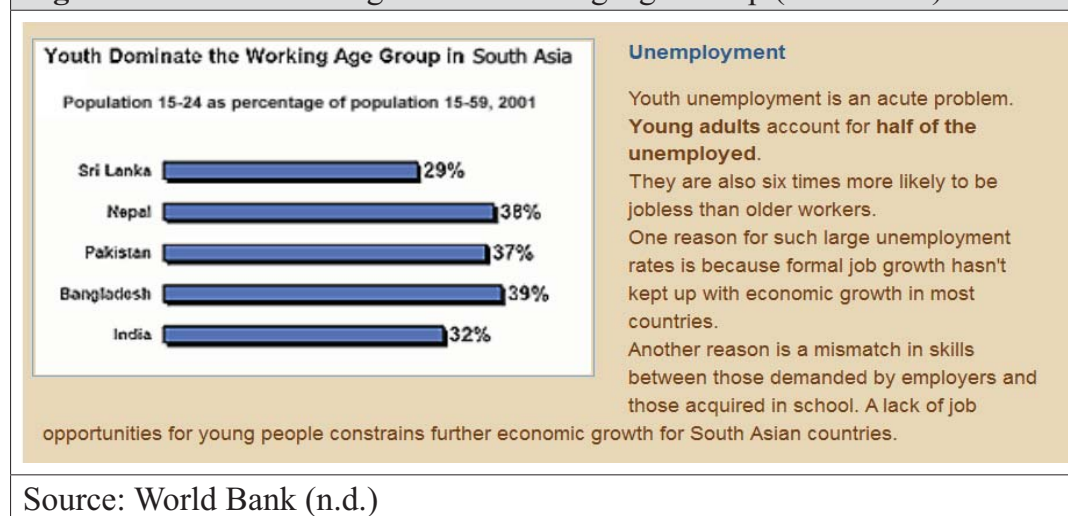


Source: United Nations 2009

Impacts of Bulging Youth Population in South Asian Countries

‘One fifth of the population in South Asia is between the ages of 15 and 24 (Wiki/South_Asia n.d: online). Most of the South Asian countries are going through a bulging youth pattern in their demographic pyramid (Ortiz & Cummins 2012: para 5). Figure 7 shows the youth percentage in the working age group.

Figure 7: Youth Percentage in the Working Age Group (South Asia)



Economy. According to the UN’s Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI), just over a quarter (28%) of the world’s MPI poor people live in Africa, while a half (51%) live in South Asia, where Arab States 2%, Latin America and Caribbean 3%, East Asia and Pacific 15% (Alkire & Emma 2010:8).

Employment. A growing number of young workers are in need of jobs. Over the 2005-07 periods, the global youth unemployment rate was 12.3 percent, on average, where North Africa 27%, Middle East 25% and South Asia 10% (ILO 2012).

Education. ‘Literacy rates among young people are low in all countries, except in Maldives and Sri Lanka. On average, only 62% of young women can read and write (compared to 77% of young men). These statistics make South Asia the region with the largest gender gap in literacy in the world. This trend has been mainly driven by the increasing need to supplement household income coupled with the inability to cover the costs of school attendance’ (Heltberg et al. 2012:7). Rises in school dropout rates and absenteeism were also attributed to increased difficulties in paying school costs and transport fees, especially in rural areas (Samuels et al 2011:3). While many girls were found to be helping their mothers earn additional income, boys increasingly appeared to be working on family farms and serving as substitutes for waged farm employees (Green, King

& Miller 2010:12). ‘Decreased school attendance and increased employment among girls and boys aged 10-16 were also shown to be linked to the income shock at the household level resulting from the employment crisis’ (Duryea & Morales 2011:527).

Social Instability. In South Asia, the jobs crisis further threatens to harm household well-being through rising levels of social discontent and instability. The ILO (2011) recently produced a social unrest index, which found that global levels of discontent are related to unemployment, worsening living standards, a lack of confidence in governments and the perception that the burden of the crisis is not being fairly shared. One of the most obvious manifestations of these findings is the increasing number of street demonstrations and protests observed worldwide since 2010 (Heltberg et al 2012:5). The income shock is also connected to higher incidences of crime and theft, which have been observed as common coping mechanisms (UNDP 2010: online and Ortiz & Cummins 2012:4).

Political Instability. ‘The regional security environment in South Asia continues to be marred by Afghanistan’s endless civil war; situation can be characterised as a strategic stalemate. The spill over of religious extremism and terrorism from Afghanistan and political instability in the Central Asian Republics are undermining development and governance’ (Gurmeet 2011:1-4). Pakistan’s continuing radical extremism and creeping Talibanisation, the unstable civilian government, the floundering economy pose a major security challenge for the region. Sri Lanka’s inability to find a lasting solution to its ethnic problems despite the comprehensive defeat of the LTTE (Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam) has serious repercussions for stability in the island nation. Bangladesh’s violence ridden politics could trigger a new wave of security concern if democracy fails to find root. The Maoist ascendancy in Nepal and its adverse impact on Nepal’s fledgling democracy, as also Nepal’s newfound inclination to seek neutrality between India and China, are a blow to what has historically been a stable India-Nepal relationship. The peoples’ nascent movement for democracy in Myanmar and several long festering insurgencies may destabilize the military Junta despite its post-election confidence. The fledgling democracy could turn violent if the Government continues to deny its citizens basic human rights.

YOUTH DEVELOPMENT STRATEGY IN SOUTH ASIA

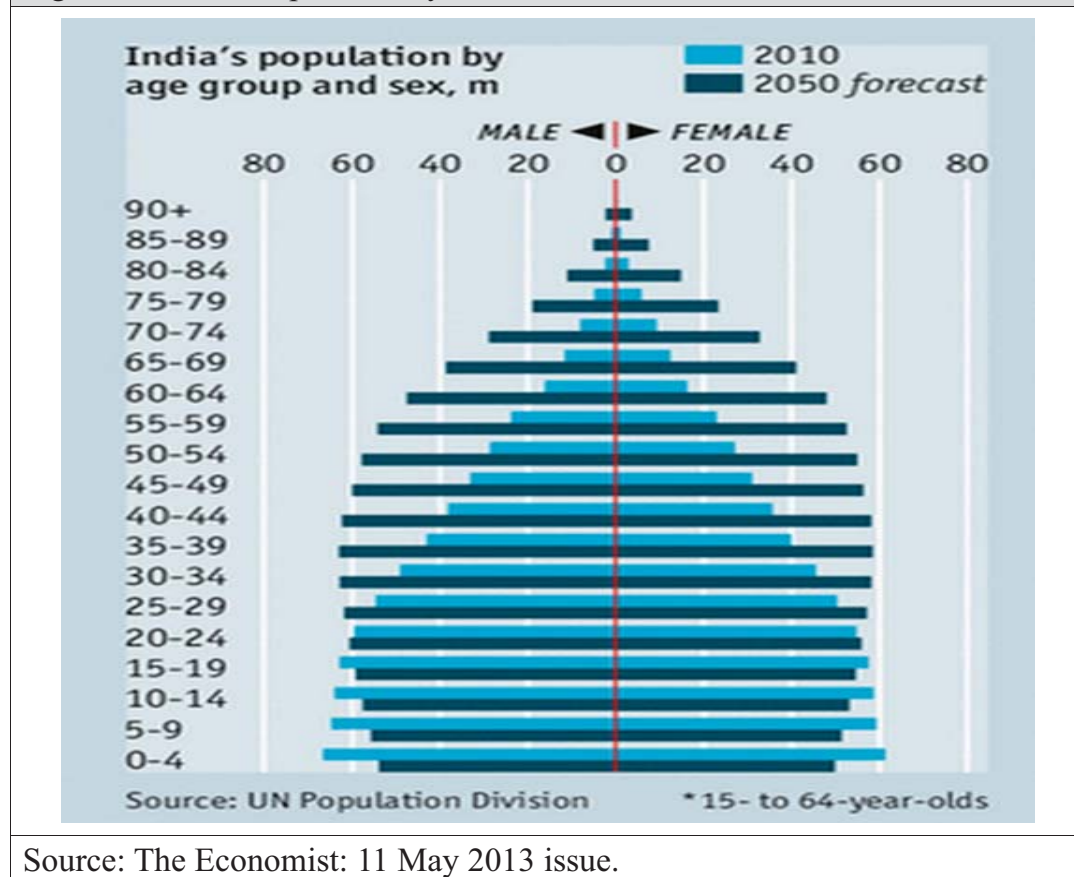
India – A Lot to be Done

Today, more than half of India’s population is under the age of 25, with 65 percent of the population under 35. By 2020, India’s average age will be just

29 years, in comparison with 37 in China and the United States, 45 in Western Europe and 48 in Japan (Rajendram 2013:para. 2). This demographic trend will confer a significant competitive advantage upon India. IMF projects that India's demographic dividend has the potential to produce an additional 2 percent per capita GDP growth each year for the next twenty years' (Knowledge@Wharton 2013: para. 3). India's ability to reap the rewards of its huge demographic advantage is far from guaranteed.

The most crucial task India faces is equipping its burgeoning youth with education and skills training. India's literacy rate sits around 74%, with significant variation according to state and gender (2011 Census). India's 2009 Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act is a big step towards guaranteeing a basic education for every child. Since its launch in 2010, India has witnessed some positive results, with 94 percent of children between the ages of 6 and 14 enrolled in school, and steady improvements in terms of facilities such as toilets and drinking water (ASER 2012:47).

Figure 8: India's Population Pyramid



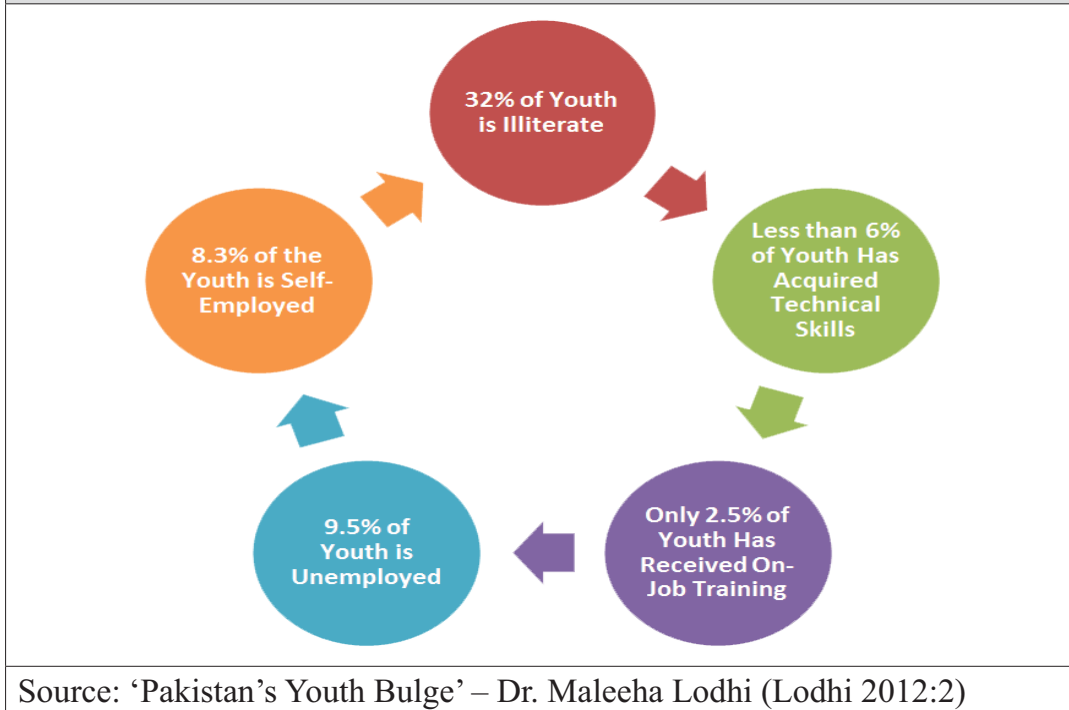
India has made some progress through its 2005 Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, which guarantees 100 days of unskilled manual work to rural households. The Act created 2.5 billion workdays for 50 million households in 2010-2011, and has had a positive macroeconomic impact by increasing GDP and trade (Zepeda et al 2013:para.1). Nevertheless, concerns regarding the inefficiency, sustainability, and long-term benefits of the scheme persist.

Pakistan – Far from Success

The New Growth Framework of Pakistan points that the proportion of people under the age of 30 years is 68 percent of the population, many of whom are graduating into the labour force and the size of the workforce is increasing at an alarming rate of 3 percent annually’ (UNDP n.d: online). Compared with other growing economies in the region, Pakistan has the larger proportion (32%) of uneducated youth with no vocational and life skills and those who end up in elementary occupations or remain unemployed or inactive with females forming the majority’ (UNDP n.d: online).

‘Pakistan’s historical weakness in engaging its youth has resulted in unintended consequences. The next generation stands on weak footing to deal with the challenges of an evolving competitive environment across the globe’ (UNDP n.d: online). Adding salt to the wound is the all-powerful threat of extremism, which is rapidly permeating an unstable economy and shaky society (Lodhi 2012:2). Extremism is evident in recurring incidences of religious, ethnic and social intolerance. Unless this issue is seriously addressed, the intersection between demographic change, economic stagnation and persisting education and gender gaps will confront Pakistan with the specter of chronic instability even social breakdown in the decades ahead.

Figure 9: Knowing Pakistan Youth



Zaidi, who is the founder of the Pakistani Youth Alliance, argues that, despite the thousands of challenges Pakistan faces, Pakistani youth are (unknowingly) struggling to equip themselves with technological advancements and are ready to break free and work towards a more prosperous and evolving society. But if Pakistan fails to improve its governance and misses the opportunity offered by changing demography a bleak future awaits the country (Lodhi 2012:2).

Sri Lanka – A Near Success Story

Sri Lanka, like other countries of the region, is going through a “Youth Bulge” episode in her demography. Sri Lanka has 5 million youth population amounting to 26 percent percent of the total population.

Recognizing this reality, committed investments in the health and education sectors and targeted social protection schemes have been the cornerstones of Sri Lanka’s social policies. In order to broaden the employment opportunities for the Sri Lankan youth and enable them to compete better in job markets, the Ministry of Youth Affairs is integrated with skill development – a single entity making it the 3rd largest segment in the annual budget. It is mentionable here that, this country has a literacy rate of 91.2 percent according to 2010 census. Sri Lanka

has a low fertility rate of 2.17 and a high life expectancy rate.

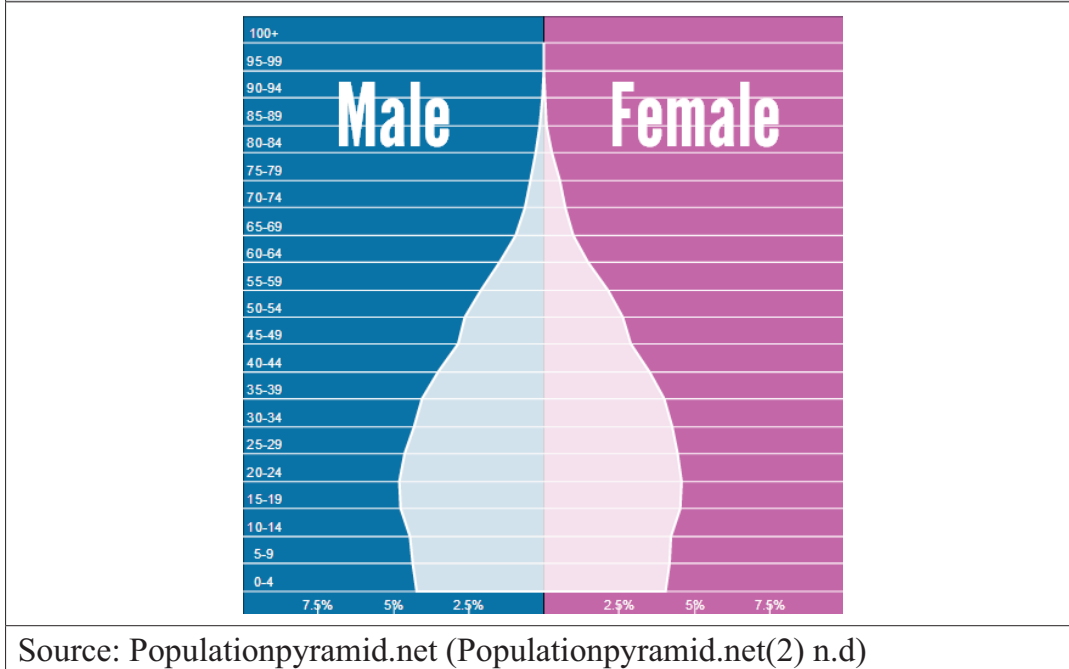
The Ministry of Youth Affairs and Skills Development and institutions under its supervision such as the National Youth Services Council of Sri Lanka have established youth capacity building programmes throughout the country to impart entrepreneurial skills, social and life -skills, non -violent conflict resolution, and vocational training to increase their overall capacity for gainful employment and enhance their quality of life. Special programmes called “Catch-up School Programmes” have been set up to ensure completion of secondary education for former young adult and child combatants.

A Youth Parliament of Sri Lanka comprises 335 members between the age group 15 and 26 years representing all ethnic communities in the country. 25 per cent of the young parliamentarians are from the predominantly Tamil areas in the North. The impetus for setting up the Youth Parliament was to create leaders or representatives nurtured in the finest democratic ideals and practices. The Youth Parliament could one day meaningfully contribute to strengthening and revitalizing the country’s democracy.

Bangladesh - National Approach to Youth Development

Bangladesh most certainly is passing through a Youth Bulge in the demographic profile. Forty-eight percent of the population is under 15 years of and the annual population growth rate is currently 1.3 percent. ‘About 31.5 percent of the population in Bangladesh lives below the poverty line. The GNI per capita income is USD 780’ (World Bank , 2013: online). In 2010, Bangladesh’s unemployment rate was 5.1 percent (BBS 2012:11). “Unemployment of educated youths is a major issue which needs to be addressed to avoid a social crisis” (Melik 2012: online). The national literacy rate is 47.68 Percent (BBS.c.2011:1). Qualitative evidence in rural areas further show that children as young as five years old were increasingly involved in supporting family farms, selling produce in markets and working as apprentices to traders (Raihan 2009:5). Often unemployed youth are the easy prey of radical ideologies and violence (Raisul 2011: p.3). The Bangladesh Population Policy estimates that if replacement-level fertility of 2.17 is reached by 2011, the population of Bangladesh will stabilize at 210 million by the year 2060. Figure show the youth bulge in the population pyramid in 2020.

Figure 10: Bangladesh youth bulge in 2020



National Youth Policy. The National Youth Policy 2003 contains provisions, which put much emphasis on self-employment by means of technical education in order to prevent the exodus of rural youth to urban areas of the country and aims at rendering assistance for creating appropriate opportunities. The policy also plans to initiate advocacy programmes for creation of awareness among the youth who intend to go abroad for employment. To implement the national policy of self-employment, the Government of the country has adopted the strategy of establishing networks through GO-NGO partnership for imparting training and offering technical assistance to reach the youths at grass roots. The National Youth Policy 2003 is under review. A fresh and updated youth policy named “National Youth Policy 2012” has been drafted.

Employment Programme and Facilitation Services. Government’s policy of offering different kinds of training for self-employment has so far proved to be effective, although due to the shortage of both material and human resources, training programmes cannot ensure the participation of the majority of youth population. There are 54 Youth Training Centres in different districts all over Bangladesh. There are also a total of 475 mobile training centres functioning at Upazila level. There is one National Youth Centre (Sheikh Hasina National Youth Centre, Savar) which provides advanced/higher training for youth organizers and officials. Central Human Resource Development Centre (CHRDC) located at the

outskirts of Dhaka City has been established to train the government official who will work, organize and run various youth development projects and courses in various youth centres. Bangladesh has now the biggest microcredit sector in the world with coverage of 14 million clients around 70 percent of whom are youth. Creation and supporting Palli Karma Shyashak Foundation (PKSF), a national apex fund for promoting NGO Multilevel Financial Institutes played a crucial role in this regard.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In order to reap the demographic dividend, national awareness, consensus and robust strategy are the answer. Expanded quality programmes for education, youth service, financial and health literacy and entrepreneurship remain to be the key. Better inclusion and participation for these youth in social and political sphere, more and more apolitical forums and initiatives to address youth concerns, and finally a paradigm shift from ruining political culture has to happen with immediate effect. However, following measures to better tap the youth bulge may duly be considered:

- a. The demographic transition should be promoted through all encompassing and comprehensive Government approach. Following Sri Lanka's positive experience, the Ministry of Youth Development should be integrated with skill development and coordinate among government agencies and NGOs as a single entity.
- b. Access to reproductive health services should be made easier by improving access to family planning measures. Improvements in the legal, educational and economic status of women should be supported through a comprehensive strategy.
- c. India's Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, which guarantees 100 days of unskilled manual work to rural households, could be a good initiative for Bangladesh as well. Although, Bangladesh recently has undertaken similar programmes, such Acts would guarantee social safety network and thus reduce urban migration and help maintain social calm.
- d. A Youth Parliament like that of Sri Lanka may be contemplated after thorough deliberations. These aspiring leaders in the Youth Parliament could one day meaningfully contribute to strengthening and revitalizing the country's democratic institutions, democratic governance and further promote ideals of peace, tolerance and justice.

Effective mechanism to be set up to assess and review domestic, regional and international job market. Various trade bodies and manpower export agencies to be involved in reviewing the technical training curriculums and expansion of facilities.

- e. Infrastructure and service sector development primarily through Public Private Partnership initiatives; faster growth trajectory of investment share in GDP would widen the job market opportunity for upcoming youths. Diversification of agricultural sector and setting up of labour intensive enterprises in districts should be planned for curbing rapid urbanization.

CONCLUSION

‘In more than 100 countries, people are getting not only more numerous, but younger. “Youth bulges” combined with economic stagnation and unemployment, can burden these countries with disproportionately high levels of violence and unrest, severely challenging their hopes for social and economic stability’ (Lisa 2003:1). Bulk and able youth population put a lot of pressure on unprepared nation’s state resources. A liberal democracy may not prevail for the reason of untapped potentials of youth bulge. A “youth bulge” by definition is obviously not static: the age of the youth bulge as it passes through the pipeline of life naturally grows progressively older, affecting society and its needs and planning quite differently at each stage of its aging process. This transition period may persist for two or three decades.

The theory of youth bulge contends that societies with rapidly growing young populations often end up with rampant unemployment and large pools of disaffected youths who are more susceptible to recruitment into rebel or terrorist groups. “Of course, youth bulge does not solely explain social unrest”- writes George Mason University’s Jack A. Goldstone. Economic development and regime type are critical elements influencing risks of conflict; as are rapid urbanization and environmental degradation (Rajendram 2013:1). Countries with ethno-religious tensions, poverty, corruption and weak political institutions are most vulnerable to youth-bulge-related violence and social unrest.

The South Asian region has been recognized for its large ratio of youth in the growing population. Against the increasing number of working population the job market is not being able to meet the rising job demands. Except India and Bhutan the rest of the countries face political turmoil in regular interval. However, recent changes in the demographic landscape of South Asia are producing handsome gains. South Asia is yet to put in place appropriate social and economic policies

that are needed to fully capitalise on the demographic dividend. The key to transforming the demographic dividend into economic growth lies not just in having more people, but having greater numbers of better trained, healthier and more productive people. The relationship here is mutually reinforcing; as noted by India's former Minister of Human Resource Development, Kapil Sibal, and "it will be a dividend if we empower our young. It will be a disaster if we fail to put in place a policy and framework where they can be empowered" (Denyer 2011: para.8). With an education that provides the skills needed to prosper in the international economy and employment opportunities that can use those skills, the youth bulge can be a driver of growth and social stability. Some states have worked towards curbing political risks associated with a large youth bulge by creating more jobs, redistributing land and sending young adults to work overseas (Cabras 2010: para. 29).

Bangladesh will have a relatively large working-age population including a major share of youth as compared to its dependent population over the next few decades. In addition to the massive effort of Bangladesh government through the ministry of youth and the ministry of labour and employment and PKSf, there are obviously other ministries, NGOs and private initiatives which facilitate youth development in the country (Rahman 2004:5-7). In Bangladesh, the 'youth bulge' will reach its peak in the year 2035 (Rahman 2004:4). Analysts consider this period of a 'youth bulge' to be a boom, during which the abundance of human capital can be used to fuel the growth of the country. The fear remains, the demographic dividend might not be fully realized due to the failures of ensuring broad-based opportunities for education, skill formation and decent work.

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