**Upskilling youth**

BY H U B E R T B O I R A R D 2020-12-28

OUR present and the future have been fluidly reshaped by Covid-19 that has caused significant shock to vulnerable and underserved populations. For many, the impact is widespread and huge. In this new normal, the youth have been hit the hardest. While the youth today are constrained, there are new opportunities which can be capitalised to overcome the loss of jobs and incomes.

Availing opportunities in the post-Covid landscape warrants youth reskilling and policy incentives. The youth have the potential to become the driving force behind thriving and sustainable rural economies.

The UN refers to the segment of population between the ages of 15 to 24 years as the youth. Today, 16 per cent of the global population (1.25 billion) comprises the youth, and by 2030, the target year for the Sustainable Development Goals, it is projected that the number of youth would have grown by seven per cent. The Asia-Pacific region accounts for a youth population of over 700 million.

Globally speaking, the largest population of youth (approximately 60pc) is concentrated in Asia and the Pacific. The region shares some common characteristics including low skill levels among the youth, difficulties in accessing finance, disparities in terms of access to resources and low technological uptake. These factors hamper the abilities of youth to harness their due potential. As sociology professor Gill Jones explains, it`s `impossible to understand the nature of youth without understanding its relationship to dependence`.

A part of the generational power imbalance relates to young people`s lack of ownership of physical and financial resources and their consequent dependence on adults. As noted, young rural men and women at least in the early stages of youth are both landless and without assets, a situation which can be (but rarely is) corrected by appropriate youth-focused policies.

Compounding the existing obstacles, Covid-19 has caused a downtrend in employment ratios and has cut down opportunities.

Limited decent work opportunities and shrinking rural economies are steadily eroding confidence, and fuelling hopelessness. During the pandemic, a narrative emerged in many developing countries that hunger and the economic downturn could create f ar more complex issues. It is perhaps particularly true in countries with a significantyouthpopuladon.

Today, around 44pc of the global population lives in rural areas, largely depending on natural resources. The youth continue to leave agriculture in the hands of the older populadon. In addidon, youth educadon has limited focus on technical skills, digitaltechnologies and innovation. These disciplines are almost non-existent in rural areas leading to the low pace of innovation in agriculture. The risk takers and innovationfriendly youth seek livelihoods which are hardly nurtured in the rural areas. Further, policy gaps, poor infrastructure, limited tech trends and innovations, weak access to finance and skewed access to natural resources lead youth to migrate in search of alternative livelihoods.

To reverse the trend and pursue rural economic development, it is important that the youth see a secure future and have the necessary skills and access to resources.

The International Fund for Agricultural Development is working in partnership with developing member countries envisioning vibrant, inclusive and sustainable rural economies, where people live free from poverty and hunger. IFAD recognises the importance of mainstreaming youth, looking at the latter as the present and future of the rural world.

Investing in youth, and especiallyenhancing their job market readiness and promoting rural agri-preneurship are fundamentals.

Focusing on creating an overall enabling environment through improved access to unance and incentivising policy for investment in rural areas andruralinfrastruc-ture for improved access to services and markets are also important.

Leaders of today and the future the youth require to be equipped with modern digital technologies and skills particularly in agriculture and agri-business, which is increasingly relevant in the post-pandemic world. Unfortunately, only 19pc of individuals appear to have access to the internet in the least-developed countries.

The post-pandemic scenario necessitates urgent action for upskilling the youth to prepare them better for benefiting from new sets of opportunities such as e-commerce, value addition, storage and cold chains etc.

Enabling the youth will improve resilient local economies that create jobs and food security at the local level under the new normal and reduce the vulnerabilities of the existing supply chains.  The writer is country director (Pakistan, Iran and Mongolia) at the International Fund for Agricultural Development, a specialised UN agency.