**Empowering Youth for a Digital Future**

**Pakistani youth must be encouraged to pursue digital skills that are relevant to the future job market, such as coding, data analysis, and digital marketing.**

[Muhammad Murtaza Noor](https://www.nation.com.pk/columnist/muhammad-murtaza-noor)

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As the world continues to advance technologically, the role of youth as agents of change in shaping the future cannot be overstated. The United Nations’ International Youth Day 2024, themed “From Clicks to Progress: Youth Digital Pathways for Sustainable Development,” acknowledges this crucial role, especially in the context of the digital revolution. This theme resonates profoundly in countries like Pakistan, where the youth population forms the backbone of society. With over 63% of its population under the age of 30, Pakistan’s youth are not only the country’s most valuable asset but also the driving force behind its digital future.

International Youth Day, observed annually on August 12, serves as an important platform to highlight the challenges, issues, and opportunities facing young people worldwide. The 2024 theme underscores the transition from mere digital engagement to tangible progress, emphasising the need for young people to leverage digital tools and platforms to contribute to sustainable development. It is a call to action for youth to use technology not only for personal growth but also for societal advancement, aligning with the United Nations’ Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Digitalisation is transforming the world rapidly. Digital technologies, including mobile devices, services, and artificial intelligence, are instrumental for sustainable development. According to United Nations reports, digital technologies and data contribute to at least 70% of the 169 SDG targets, potentially reducing the cost of achieving these goals to 55 trillion US dollars.

Pakistan, with its vast youth demographic, stands at a critical juncture. The country’s digital landscape has grown rapidly over the past decade, with increasing internet penetration, widespread smartphone usage, and a burgeoning tech industry. However, the challenge lies in ensuring that this digital growth translates into sustainable development outcomes.

The majority of Pakistani youth are digital natives, comfortable with navigating social media, online education platforms, and e-commerce sites. Yet, the question remains: How can these digital interactions be harnessed to drive progress, particularly in areas such as education, employment, and civic engagement?

One of the primary challenges in Pakistan is ensuring digital literacy across all segments of the youth population. While urban areas have seen significant strides in this regard, rural areas lag behind, creating a digital divide that threatens to exacerbate existing inequalities. For the theme “From Clicks to Progress” to be realised, it is essential that digital literacy is prioritised at the national level.

Digital literacy goes beyond the basic ability to use a smartphone or computer. It encompasses critical thinking, understanding the implications of digital actions, and the ability to create content rather than just consume it. Pakistani youth need to be equipped with these skills to transform their digital engagement into meaningful contributions to society.

Youth unemployment remains a significant challenge in Pakistan, with the job market unable to keep pace with the growing number of graduates. However, the digital economy offers a viable solution. E-commerce, freelancing, and digital marketing are just a few areas where young Pakistanis are already making their mark. Platforms like Daraz, Rozee.pk, and Upwork have provided opportunities for young entrepreneurs to tap into global markets, breaking down traditional barriers to entry.

The theme “From Clicks to Progress” encourages youth to move beyond passive consumption of digital content to actively participating in and shaping the digital economy. This involves not only utilising existing platforms but also creating new ones that address local needs and challenges. For instance, developing localized apps that cater to the unique needs of Pakistani consumers or using digital tools to solve community problems can drive both economic growth and social progress.

The digital age has also revolutionised civic engagement. Social media platforms have become powerful tools for advocacy, allowing young people to raise their voices on various social and economic issues. In Pakistan, digital activism has played a crucial role in movements such as #MeToo and climate strikes, demonstrating the potential of youth to influence public discourse and policy.

However, digital activism must be strategic and informed. The theme “From Clicks to Progress” highlights the need for young people to move beyond mere online presence to impactful action. This involves using digital tools to mobilise communities, engage with policymakers, and drive concrete changes. For example, youth-led organisations in Pakistan can leverage social media to promote sustainable practices, raise awareness about environmental issues, or advocate for educational reforms.

Education is a critical component of sustainable development, and digital technology has the potential to revolutionise the way young Pakistanis learn. Online education platforms, Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs), and digital libraries have made education more accessible, especially in remote areas. However, the challenge lies in aligning digital education with the skills needed for sustainable development.

Pakistani youth must be encouraged to pursue digital skills that are relevant to the future job market, such as coding, data analysis, and digital marketing. Additionally, integrating sustainability into the digital curriculum is essential. This means teaching young people not only how to use digital tools but also how to apply them in ways that contribute to sustainable development goals, such as reducing carbon footprints, promoting renewable energy, and fostering social inclusion.

While the potential of digital pathways for sustainable development is immense, several challenges need to be addressed to fully realise this potential in Pakistan. These include: bridging the gap between urban and rural areas in terms of digital access and literacy is crucial. The government, along with private sector partners, must invest in infrastructure and training programmes to ensure that all young Pakistanis have equal opportunities to benefit from the digital revolution. As more young people engage in the digital economy and online activism, the risk of cyber threats increases. It is essential to educate youth about cybersecurity and develop robust legal frameworks to protect their digital rights. Ensuring that young women have equal access to digital tools and opportunities is vital for achieving sustainable development. Initiatives that promote gender equality in the digital space, such as coding boot camps for girls or mentorship programmes for female entrepreneurs, are essential. Government policies should support youth in their digital endeavours, providing incentives for digital entrepreneurship, investing in tech education, and promoting digital inclusion.

Pakistan is ranked among the top 10 most affected countries by climate change, according to the Global Climate Risk Index by Germanwatch, cited in a UN report. With the youth comprising the largest proportion of its population, it is crucial to engage them in climate action. Chairman of the Capital Development Authority, Muhammad Ali Randhawa, has recently proposed allocating academic marks for students’ participation in plantation drives, a step that could significantly boost their involvement. Additionally, leveraging digital technologies like social media campaigns, online educational platforms, and virtual activism can further mobilise youth participation in climate change and environmental initiatives.

The theme “From Clicks to Progress: Youth Digital Pathways for Sustainable Development” is not just a call to action but a vision for the future. For Pakistani youth, this vision presents both an opportunity and a challenge. The opportunity lies in the ability to shape their future through digital means, contributing to sustainable development in ways that were previously unimaginable. The challenge is to ensure that this digital progress is inclusive, equitable, and aligned with the broader goals of social and economic development.

As Pakistan navigates the complexities of the digital age, its youth will play a pivotal role in driving progress. By embracing digital tools, fostering innovation, and advocating for sustainable practices, young Pakistanis can turn clicks into meaningful progress, building a future that is prosperous, inclusive, and sustainable.

**Muhammad Murtaza Noor**
The writer is analyst, writer and higher education expert.