YPF-UNDP Exploration of Youth Empowerment and Civic Engagement: Bangladesh

Summary

Empathy, tolerance, and civic education are the building blocks of a sustainable and safe community. Often, the design and implementation of such policies take place outside the purview of the key stakeholders– young people, academicians, politicians, and development partners. YPF & UNDP's project brought together 13 young people, 3 politicians, and 4 CSO representatives to discuss the key considerations they felt were crucial for successful incorporation of these values. After a three-month literature review, four rounds of webinar discussions, and research debrief, the team have concluded that the key to youth empowerment in Bangladesh lies in compulsory moral and civic education, accessible youth platforms, and community building exercises from an early age.

Methodology

- *Literature review (October-November 2020)*
  Outcome: Research consistently identified the following as critical to establishing responsive citizenship: education, empathy, and community-building.

- *Themed Webinar (November-December 2020)*
  Outcome: Post literature review, the themed webinars created a bridge between youth consultation and expert panels. The insights from each consultation were reframed and represented in consecutive panels, leading to a steady accumulation of knowledge, experience, and ideation. A total of four webinars were broadcasted over social media to engage 22,000 people over all platforms.

> **Theme 1: Education, Empathy and Tolerance in shaping responsive citizenship**
> **Theme 2: Building better communities: Role of civic participation and responsible citizens**

Recommendations

1. **Compulsory moral education** came through consistently as a necessity for implementation of empathy, tolerance, and civic responsibility. The following characteristics of moral education have been highlighted as the key to successful implementation:

    a. **Starting moral education in the early childhood years** is imperative for efficient and effective inculcation of the values.

    b. **Moral education must go beyond religious education** to be inclusive and meaningful to all students and communities. This means that religious studies books cannot be substitutes for moral education textbooks and exercises, and madrasah students will also need access to these comprehensive understanding of moral and civic education.

    c. **Curricula must be activity oriented** (such as the one for UNFPA's Gender Equity Movement in Schools) to be easily comprehensible and impactful. Sense of civic duty and environmental awareness can be created through practical lessons and activities, e.g., cleaning up parks and neighborhoods (Nepal case study).

    d. **Global citizenship education** (SDG 4.7) is necessary to embed students' civic responsibility in the modern society as representatives of Bangladesh. This would merge national identity and civic engagement as core values.

    e. **The academic textbooks must be continually updated** with the most recent and relevant information regarding man-made climate change to ensure students can engage with the most immediate issues through service, advocacy or other means.

    f. **Teacher retraining** has been identified as a critical policy requirement for successful implementation of civic values, as students and communities look to teachers as role models.

2. **Platform creation and awareness campaigns** have been recommended as a solution to engage older youth, particularly those who feel disenfranchised by institutions and state agencies.

    a. **Providing an innovative and interactive platform** for youth to communicate their needs and struggles on an individual and community basis can be empowering. This enables them to simultaneously voice problems and brainstorm local solutions that may be more effective and accepted than centrally disseminated ones.

    b. **Keeping safe, digital, and anonymous options** in the platforms is crucial so they feel safe and engaged in the system.

    c. **Implementation of a comprehensive media plan** surrounding environmental awareness is necessary. Localized documentaries can be an engaging medium to educate young people on environmental concerns that relate directly to their immediate surroundings. Social media influencers can also be utilized to communicate these concerns to adolescents.

Introduction

Individuals play a significant role in shaping their surroundings - their behavior directly determines the prosperity of their communities. As a result, individuals who strive to serve as responsive citizens of their community, as well as the behaviors they exhibit, are the subject of much study. In the context of Bangladesh and our research, active citizenship has found itself divided into three criteria: individual empathy and education, wider political engagement, and environmental awareness. Not only do they serve as avenues for citizens of Bangladesh to exhibit themselves in, but they are also opportunities for the government and other institutions to intervene in.

These avenues, however, face several challenges in Bangladesh. Rising intolerance, a lack of political participation and environmental neglect have been significant obstacles to achieving an active citizenry. They can be attributed to a variety of causes, ranging from educational factors to a growing rift between individuals and institutions. The impact of these challenges is worrying as well: a lack of individual empathy and political participation has been a significant source of turmoil within Bangladeshi society, while environmental awareness has become a question of survival for many Bangladeshis.

Empathy and Education

Amalgamation of literature, youth, and expert opinion

The individuals who possess more elevated levels of compassion have more prominent capacities to see and comprehend the conditions of others' lives, and hence may uphold the public strategies that address the social government assistance and prosperity of others.

The **literature review** states that exceptionally compassionate individuals develop interest in outsiders, challenge biases, perceive different views and respect each them, motivate mass activity and social change, and build up an aspiring creative mind. Regarding the statement, different **political and academic figures** stated that proper educational institutions and family and civic values are significant in shaping **the youth**. Even the youth expressed their concern on the family's role in nurturing children to grow up to be responsible citizens because a **sense of giving back** and accountability comes from family, surrounding and education.

The lack of harmony in the country is partly due to the segregation of students of Madrasah and non-Madrasah students. This leads to the rising dispute among the youth and to eradicate this apathy, the government took an initiative to incorporate English and Science modules into Madrasah education to pave the way for these students to make a transition into the conventional pedagogy pattern during tertiary education.

Policy Impact

a. According to political perspective, the development of scientific thinking should be promulgated alongside scientific education. Analytical thinking skills should be increased. By increasing scientific knowledge, analytical ability can be increased.
b. The development partner also suggested to include elements of empathy in the educational curriculum.
c. Continue to reduce the segregation between Madrasah and non-Madrasah students through incorporation of English and Science modules.
d. Hereafter, all the parties emphasized on practicing empathy and tolerance by being interactive in school. These can include interactive sessions in classes containing visual elements to impart knowledge with two-way communication.
e. Showing impactful documentaries and images in such classes have a lasting impact about the aspects of responsive citizenship.

Wider Political Engagement

Amalgamation of literature, youth, and expert opinion

In terms of political engagement in Bangladesh, Bangladeshi academics have stated that values require an accessible platform for expression, but according to **the literature review**, there exists a disconnect between youth and political platforms. **Young people** are interested in political participation that is new and innovative, in comparison to traditional efforts undertaken by institutions. **Development partners** such as the UNDP have recognized this as a "digital divide", creating an opportunity for organizations and the government to digitize political participation.

This disconnect has led to a widening rift between people and institutions. A lot of young people believe there is a need to combat political apathy. For institutions to do this, they must build a significant amount of trust to engage citizens. Various policies exist in Bangladesh to achieve this, but institutions must pursue them more aggressively. The policies also must have a nation-wide effect - in this regard, rural local institutions can be empowered to raise awareness. In terms of raising awareness, the youth believe it [institutions] must target specific demographics within them for better understanding. **Political representatives** on the expert panel agreed that they must be better engaged with youth forums across the country.

Policy Impact

a. The government and other organizations must demonstrate zeal in engaging citizens to participate politically.
b. Ultimately, this should enable young people to empower themselves as "changemakers" and engage in activities such as policy advocacy, which is deemed desirable by political figures who participated in the panel.
c. However, it is worth noting the urgency of this issue: Bangladesh's demographic dividend window is narrowing very quickly.

Environmental Awareness

<u>Amalgamation of literature, youth, and expert opinion</u>

Rapid urbanization has made policy-makers concerned about the environment. Research confirms what experts have suspected for a while: fiscal concerns often overshadow the ethical responsibility of a citizen to be aware of the environmental responsibilities. **Literature** highlights the importance of media research and planning in the field of environmental awareness to address community mentality. Nepal is a good case study of how young people can be mobilized to create a culture of sustainability in rural communities. Documentaries are also an effective medium to educate children on how society suffers from degrading environmental factors.

Political representatives have reflected that young people have diverse advocacy interests (e.g. gender rights, climate crisis, poverty) and need to specialize in specific sectors even within climate change action (fresh-water crisis, deforestation, recycling, etc.). This can be further ensured by localizing central policies so they can be more grassroot focused. The private sector can also contribute to this broader implementation by building the efficient environmental ecosystems in their production and CSR projects. **Development partners** have echoed this sentiment by referring to localization of SDG 12: Responsible production and consumption.

Experts have also recommended that academic textbooks be constantly updated with the impacts, concerns, and solutions to climate change. Young people believe that while institutional and educational enforcement of climate awareness needs to take place, it must also start at home. As young people are also exposed to a greater online material, influencers can shape their perspective on environmental duties. Access to these communications need to be distributed evenly from suburban areas to grassroots. This would help mobilize youth innovation in capacity building of agricultural techniques as this is the primary sector for the climate crisis in Bangladesh. Practical exercises such as cleaning up neighborhoods and parks can help embed this sense of responsibility and need for action from an early age. Additionally, local youth role models can help to inspire others in the community.

<u>Policy Impact</u>

a. Implementation of a comprehensive media plan is needed. Different documentaries, videos can help youths and children to learn more about the environment. Influencers can also communicate these concerns to adolescents.
b. Sense of belonging must be created among children from primary school. Children must be taught the practical lessons of environmental awareness through activities, e.g., cleaning up the parks, neighborhoods etc.
c. The academic textbooks must be updated with relevant information about climate change

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