

YOUTH INTEGRATION IN COOPERATIVES: AN ASIAN PERSPECTIVE

Yashavantha Dongre
Formerly Professor, University of Mysore,

Introduction:

Young people are an important asset for cooperatives, not only because they ensure the generational renewal of the membership and will be the cooperatives' future leaders, but also because they have a greater capacity for innovation and entrepreneurship and therefore are more inclined to work with new technologies and generally have higher levels of education than older cooperative members. In fact, youth had shown a great deal of enthusiasm and actively participated in the co-operative movement in its early stages. Co-operatives coming to the centre stage in Europe had a lot to do with youth participation as members and willingness of the young people to work for co-operatives. In Asian region too, there are evidences to show that a fair share of youth took active interest in co-operatives. It was observed that "in developing countries young people (below 30) are the section of the population most actively and willingly involved in the co-operative movement" (Maslennikov, 1990, 27). In Japan, the consumer co-operative movement was built around the University Co-operatives in which young students took active part. In India from the very early stages the co-operatives in educational institutions were among the most successful consumer co-operatives (Bhatnagar, 1927)

But today the situation seems to have changed totally, so much so, that the co-operative movement is coming to be known as a movement of the aged. Asia Pacific region houses the largest chunk of youth in the world, but the youth participation in co-operatives is not up to the desired level. We therefore, need to understand the demographic features of the region so as to be able to facilitate youth integration in co-operatives.

Profile of youth population in Asia Pacific Region:

Asia and Pacific region is the most youthful region both in terms of the number of young people as well as the rate at which their population is growing. Most millennials of the world are found in this region that houses more than half of world's young people aged between 15 and 24. South Asia in particular accounts for the largest share of youth population of the globe even with a broader parameter of defining youth as those aged between 15 and 35 (Paranjothi & Dongre, 2006). However, the spread of youth population within the region is very uneven. In East Asia the share of youth population is said to be around 17%, while it is around 18% in South East Asia and the Pacific. The South Asian region houses the world's largest pool of youth accounting for about 26 percent of world's youth population (UNECA, 2010)

It is estimated that "the Asia-Pacific region contains 60 per cent of the world's youth population, or 750 million young persons aged 15 to 24 years. In 2010, India alone had 234 million young people, the highest number of any country in the world (representing 19 per cent of the country's total population), followed by China with 225 million (representing 17 per cent of the total population). By comparison, Japan

only had 12 million young people or 10 per cent of the population. Bangladesh and the Philippines both also had very high shares of youth – around 20 per cent of the total population. (UNO, 2010)

As per the latest official census, the total youth population in India increased from 168 million in 1971 to 422 million in 2011. It is further estimated more than 50% of its population below the age of 25 and more than 65% below the age of 35. It is expected that, in 2020, the average age of an Indian will be 29 years, compared to 37 for China and 48 for Japan (GOI, 2017). China and Indonesia are the other two countries where the youth population forms a major part of the total population. The developed part of Asia, in particular countries like Japan, Korea, New Zealand and Australia do not enjoy this demographic dividend, since their population is aging and hence shortage of labour force is a common problem for these countries. **Challenges faced by Youth:**

On an overall basis the youth segment in the region is enjoying various benefits accrued through faster economic growth. However, on comparative terms with developed countries, majority of the Asian countries still pose various challenges to young people. Some of the important areas of such challenges are examined below.

Education:

Significant achievements are made in the region in terms of enrollment in secondary education. At 64.1 percent the enrollment rate is actually higher than the world average of 62.5 percent (UNESCAP, 2015). There is marked improvement in the educational infrastructure, rate of enrollment in higher education and in access to education to girls and women. However, barriers also remain in accessing education due to persistent rural-urban disparities, rising socioeconomic inequality and continuing exclusion of children with disabilities, which contributes to a large number of out-of-school youth. Education and training systems often do not match modern labour market demands. The mismatch creates a sub-population of discouraged and excluded youth that are outside the educational system and are also unemployed. In Indonesia and the Philippines, for example, around 25 per cent of youth are “not in education, employment or training” (UNESCAP, 2015)

Employment:

In terms of economic development Asia Pacific region is in the forefront so much so that the 21st century is often referred to as the Asian century. The avenues of employment are increasing compared to the pre-globalization days. Nonetheless, at the global level there is a youth employment crisis. Young people can be as much as three times more likely than adults to be unemployed, and the ILO estimates that more than 73.6 million young people are looking for work (ILO, 2015). Of course, Compared to the youth unemployment rate in the OECD area, the youth unemployment rate in Asia and the Pacific is relatively low. However, this rate masks the key underlying concern that most young people in the region cannot afford being unemployed, because of absent unemployment benefits and other support measures. Low remuneration and uncertain terms of employment haunt youth in majority of the countries in the developing parts of Asia. Women in particular are generally the more deprived due to the prevailing social and religious barriers. Employment being the most critical element that determines the quality of life, this issue needs a great deal of attention in the Asian region.

Health:

Health is another important area that poses several challenges to young people in the Asian-Pacific region. Here again as a spill over effect of increased rate of growth and increasing GDP in many countries of the region, access to health has generally increased. However, the issues of malnutrition, female access to health, infant mortality, early marriage and consequent health problems of women, increasing rate of HIV infection among youth, increasing cost of medical services leading to reduced access etc continue to trouble the youth of the region. In South Asia the problem is more acute with health facilities being generally under the government domain and the quality of such services being far below the required quality. Accidents, drug and alcohol addiction, mental health problems are some of the other issues that have increased health risks in the region (UNESCAP, 2015). A persisting challenge, compromising health outcomes among youth, relates to the dire hygiene and sanitation conditions, as 58 per cent of the region's population still lacks access to improved sanitation facilities. The Disability-Adjusted Life Years (DALYs) measure of diarrheal incidence per 100,000 people is higher than 1,000 in most South and South-West Asian countries and some South-East Asian countries, indicating high health costs and a significant loss in productive potential among all, including young people (ADB, 2013)

Others

Youth in Asian region face some of the other challenges as well. Participation and in decision making and democratic process is one such issue. The civil rights and citizen participation have largely improved in almost all Asian countries, but still youth participation levels are not very encouraging. In many Asian countries the voting rights, right to contest elections, right to participate in associational life and even right to take own decisions at domestic and personal level are fully ensured for the young people especially women. Youth are often vulnerable and lack the requisite knowledge and skills to adapt to the changing economic and social environment. In Australia, more needs to be done to facilitate the participation of young people. In China, there is a need to address low educational budgets and imbalance between rural and urban areas. In India, it is critical to meet the real needs of each youth community for programmes to be effective – these needs may differ markedly from one region to another. Programmes and further detailed action plans, with set timeframes and monitoring indicators are needed to accelerate Malaysia's effective implementation of the National Youth Development Policy and achieve its stated goals (UNESCAP, 2007). It is thus clear that irrespective of the prevailing economic status and political system, gaps exist in opportunities for youth across the region. It is therefore significant proper institutional arrangements be made to facilitate young people realize their potential and access their rightful privileges.

Why Cooperatives are ideal platform for youth?

How far can co-operatives be the institutional choices the youth in the region would embrace? If co-operatives can be of help in addressing the above challenges, they would be certainly an important choice for the young people. There are ample evidences and grounded arguments to demonstrate co-operatives can effectively address varied needs of the youth. Co-operatives being principle-based organizations exhibit a sense of social commitment and hence its member community can always hope to get their needs fulfilled.

Unemployment being the most critical challenge faced by youth, co-operatives can be an important source to look for. It is estimated that co-operatives around the world can create around 100 million jobs (ILO, 2012). It is also well argued that co-operatives could be an important mode of entrepreneurship and young people can take the co-operative way for establishing new start-ups and run their own businesses. It is said that If one is looking to establish one's own venture working with others to gain scale and share risks ... or one wishes to work with others in a business that all would own ... or one has an idea for a community owned business ... co-operative models offer an innovative solution (McDonnell et. al, 2012).

Co-operatives are seen to be an ideal option for providing better and affordable healthcare facilities. As has been well demonstrated in case of Bangladesh, "cooperative societies act as a risk management strategy for members, working on the basic principle of risk pooling during illness. This risk-pooling mechanism can mitigate the consequences of dependence on out-of-pocket payments to finance healthcare, thereby facilitating the move towards Universal Health Coverage" (Sarker et. al., 2016). There have been studies that demonstrated co-operative's ability to help youth access their health needs as well as providing youth space to serve people in need of health care (Matthew, 2017)

Co-operatives are seen to be supporting educational services in a variety of ways. In fact, co-operatives in educational institutions that consist of students, teachers and staff as members and serving the campus community, are common in the Asian region. University co-operatives in Japan are an outstanding example for providing Student Support Services and contributing to study and learning apart from providing part time jobs to youth. There are examples of co-operative educational institutions that provide educational services to youth with a focus on access, equity and quality.

It is therefore evident that co-operatives can empower youth in many ways. They not only provide a participatory opportunity to young people and there by enhance their skills in leadership, financial as well as business management, but also meet their varied needs. Therefore, co-operatives can be a humane, democratic and trustworthy institutional choice for youth of the region to address their varied challenges.

Co-operatives and Youth – The Mutuality

Youth need co-operatives to find solutions to many of their problems and the co-operative movement needs youth for it to flourish in the decades to come. Youth taking active part in co-operatives help them develop the qualities of mutuality, collectivism and contributing to each other. Co-operatives provide youth with a unique institutional choice to address their own issues through self-help and self-drive. At the same time the co-operative movement has a lot to gain if youth participate in co-operatives in a big way. Any socio-economic movement can get strengthened and survive longer when young blood is infused into it. Co-operatives get new ideas, get human resource that understand and handle modern technology and get future leaders who enrich the movement and take to better heights. Therefore, "it is essentially a win-win situation where the youth as well as the co-operative movement would gain" (Dongre & Paranjothi, 2006)

The ICA Blueprint (ICA, 2013) envisages that the co-operatives be the fastest growing economic entities of next decade. It emphasized on co-operative identity and various ways and means of bringing co-operatives to the forefront of the global economic institutions. This wish could be realized only with young people showing

interest in co-operatives and participate both as members and workers. In this sense youth are an essential resource that help the co-operative movement sustain. FAO has seen youth as the main resource to sustain agricultural co-operatives (FAO, 2012). Young members and leaders have contributed enormously to the success of many women co-operatives in India (Jan, 2008). At the same time, youth issues need to be addressed both competently and earnestly and this has not been happening now through the mainstream institutions. “Youth is a period of many transitions such as moving from dependence on parents/family to independence and autonomy. One of the major transitions young people have to navigate is the journey from education and training to the labour market (European Commission, 2015). It is important that the co-operatives make effective intervention at this stage in order to be able to gain confidence of the youth.

It is important to know as to what the youth of the present generation are looking for while making their institutional choice. A survey shows that 84% of youth surveyed say that they want to make the world better and in fact consider it their duty to do so (Deloitte, 2018). The survey further shows that Millennials’ confidence in business, loyalty to employers have deteriorated and they yearn for leaders whose decisions might benefit the world—and their careers. Today’s young people expect a different management style and corporate culture. The report also notes that the youth today are looking for rapid progression, a varied and interesting career and constant feedback, and also want to feel their work is worthwhile and that their efforts are being recognised. If they feel their expectations are not being met, they will move on quickly. This situation throws up a great opportunity for co-operatives to present themselves as an important institutional choice. Co-operatives being democratic, being driven by a social agenda and being transparent can provide greater space for the youth to get involved and get their needs fulfilled. In fact, co-operatives have inherent features that fit the needs of the youth. The cooperative form of enterprise provides young people a means to create their own employment, find jobs with enterprises that often align themselves with their own values, and participate as member-owners of enterprises where their voice is heard (ILO, 2012).

Leva Padagaite, a youth co-operator and participant in the ICA’s Youth Conference has very aptly expressed as to what co-operative mean for the youth like her. For the question how she got into co-operatives she says “After graduating as a filmmaker from university, I wasn't very lucky with the bosses that I got. I couldn't handle toxic hierarchical cultures and the mad pressure to make enough money each month in an industry that offers no security. Most importantly, I couldn't find meaning in my work and became disillusioned and isolated. Simply put, I felt like a proper failure. My fellow filmmaker Simon and I reinvented the workers cooperative model as a way to topple hierarchies and the exploitation of workers in the film industry — only to find that this way of working already exists and there’s the whole worldwide movement sharing our values and vision of a more equal society. We started attending events all over the U.K. that made us feel like we’re not alone and quite frankly, changed our lives.” For the query as to why it is important for the youth to get involved in co-operative movement she says “Our generation actually cares about what we do and what impact our work has on others but we get stuck in jobs that drain our passion, tell us to suck it up and leave us disillusioned, isolated, and depressed. We are told that this is how the world works, this is what success looks like and that we have to

race or we will be left behind. The co-op movement is an inspiration, a proof, a springboard, a safety net — we don't have to play by the rules that make us miserable, we can evolve the game, we can find others that are more fun to play with. Young people are thrown out in a world that they have no ownership over, no say over the things that matter to them. Cooperatives turn that upside down (Coca, 2017). It is therefore necessary to appreciate the saying that “If you want to involve more young people in your cooperative, you have to do more than ferry them along as passengers. Hand them the keys to the operations” (AEC, 2016)

In the backdrop of the above, if we view the current scenario in Asian region, we find that “at present, youth are generally not attracted towards cooperatives either in terms of taking up a job or in terms of becoming an active member. Though there is a good chunk of members in the cooperatives in general, there is no evidence to show that the youth are choosing to be the members. The overall hypothesis may be that the youth are generally detached from the cooperatives and hence are losing an opportunity of democratic practice and participation in decision-making. Youth apathy towards cooperatives is both a loss to the youth as well as the cooperative movement” (Verma, 2012).

Asian and Pacific region being the hub of youth population in the world, the co-operative sector needs to push hard to assimilate larger share of this population into its fold. There will have to be specific strategies put in place to create awareness and make youth believe in co-operative movement. The co-operative federal/apex organizations, the educational institutions and the domestic co-operative promotion bodies on the one hand and the global institutions such as the UNO, ILO, FAO, UNESCO and the ICA on the other, need to put in concerted efforts towards creating awareness among youth and make them repose faith on the co-operative movement. It is also necessary to lobby and negotiate with national governments to put in place conducive policies and legislations that create space for youth to participate in co-operatives. Once the mutuality is understood, both the youth and the co-operatives will be in a better position to appreciate each other better. Asian and Pacific region is longing for this to happen.