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India–Bhutan
Youth Summit

ROYAL INSTITUTE FOR GOVERNANCE AND STRATEGIC STUDIES

R I G S S

W E B I N A R

COMING TOGETHER IN THE TIMES OF COVID-19

16 July 2020

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01   Introduction

The pandemic has changed the landscape of how we communicate and connect with one another. With social distancing as the prevailing norm for the foreseeable future, we need to look for ways to reach out to people and form meaningful bonds. How are the youth navigating this new terrain? How has the pandemic affected them and what are their main concerns?

The webinar sought to respond to some of these pertinent questions by bringing together the alumni of India-Bhutan Youth Summit to discuss the current situation and share their experiences and insights. Through this platform, we hoped to understand how the youth is viewing the current situation and identify opportunities for young people, particularly in India and Bhutan, to take care of themselves, support each other, and help their communities during the pandemic and beyond.

The webinar had two moderators, Akanksha Jadhav from India and Phuntshok Dechen Yangchen from Bhutan, who set the tone for the webinar and moderated the discussions. There were six speakers, three from India and Bhutan each, who gave their insights on various issues pertaining to the youth and the pandemic. The broad areas of discussion and the corresponding speakers were:

- Issues/challenges due to or exacerbated by COVID-19 – Thukten Sherab (Bhutan), Aakash Goel (India)
- Good practices and inspiring efforts in respective countries and across the globe – Kinley Seldon (Bhutan), Muhammed Jaseel C K (India)
- Opportunities and way forward – Nimrat Kaur (India), Sawan Nepal (Bhutan)

These discussions were followed by a Q&A session. Then, the moderators reiterated the main take-aways from the webinar and thanked everyone for their participation and support.

The audience of the webinar consisted of IBYS alumni as well as their peers who displayed interest in attending the webinar.

02   Issues and challenges

The discussion began with assessing how the pandemic has changed day-to-day lives of the youth. The speakers noted that the current pandemic has already been so pervasive that even basic social norms have undergone a change, whereby greeting one another without shaking hands and wearing masks have become the new normal. Although it was always recommended, the act of washing hands thoroughly and frequently has never been such a crucial part of our daily hygiene as it is today. Because of social distancing and the inability to make physical contact with others on a daily basis, the majority of the youth have increased the amount of time they spend on social media and other online platforms. On the positive side, some of the youth have utilized this time to turn inward and focus on introspection and self-reflection as a way of identifying their passions and honing their identities. They have also used this time to reassess their priorities and reconnect with family members and friends. The pandemic and the ensuing lockdown have also made the youth to seriously evaluate and begin investing in upgrading their skill set.

There have been many issues and challenges pertaining to the youth that have either emanated from or been exacerbated by the pandemic. The education system and the process of learning have been severely disrupted and the youth have had to find a way to cope. They have had to adapt to online instruction, which most find not as effective as face-to-face instruction. In most cases, they have experienced restricted access to resources for online learning. They fear that the impersonal nature of online instruction and the stark gap in the access to technology and resources will adversely affect the quality of education. For those who have completed their education, the main challenge mentioned was the rising unemployment. Since the pandemic has affected productivity in almost all the sectors, graduates have either found it extremely difficult to find employment or experienced being laid off from their current jobs. In such a scenario, the youth are highly prone to commercial exploitation because they are the ones most severely affected by the loss of jobs and high unemployment rates.

Digital addiction among the youth was a recognized issue even before the pandemic. The current crisis has exacerbated the issue since the youth are unable to venture out, interact with others and build experiences in the physical world. Addiction to social media, online gaming and similar

platforms have increased considerably during this time; the short-term and long-term consequences of this trend has to be acknowledged and addressed. In addition to digital addiction, we have to be cognizant of an array of mental issues that the youth might be facing due to loss of employment, loneliness, sense of uncertainty, stress and abuse at home, just to name a few. It is paramount that we do not neglect the mental health of the youth during this difficult time.

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03   Good practices and inspiring efforts in respective countries and across the globe

The speakers acknowledged that COVID-19 and its far-reaching effects would be felt for many years to come. Therefore, we must find the strength to adjust, adapt and manage our lives in new ways. It is important that we keep ourselves motivated to carry on; at the same time, since people often seek inspiration from elsewhere, those in a position of leadership must not hold back and do everything they can to energize, motivate and inspire.

That is why it is important to look beyond the difficulties and highlight the good work being done. The speakers noted that in both Bhutan and India, the state has put in place numerous systems and processes to overcome the situation. In Bhutan, the King has displayed unparalleled leadership and visited far-flung areas of the country to educate the populace and put efficient systems in place. The citizens, including students have contributed to the *Kidu* fund designed to help those most adversely affected by the current crisis. Indeed, all over the globe, there are inspiring stories of how people have united to overcome the pandemic and its varied consequences.

One of the best examples of collaboration during this time has been the race to find a vaccine, which has witnessed effective knowledge sharing practices, speedy connectivity, community participation, and a culture of trust. At the same time, the government, businesses and non-profit organizations have come together to develop solutions for the community. Each agency has brought its own data and insights – national databases, business consumer insights and on-the-ground sensing – in order to co-create viable solutions.

Another example is the resilience shown by educators and teachers during this time. Due to the swift nature of the pandemic, schools have not had the time to offer thorough training or support to teachers for their emerging role or even give clear guidelines on how to conduct and navigate disaster management, response and recovery. Despite these daunting circumstances, we have witnessed inspiring school leaders acting to ensure the safety and wellbeing of families and minimizing the disruption faced by out-of-school children.

As noted earlier, the pandemic and its far-reaching consequences have had a significant effect on young people's mental health. Fear, anxiety, anger, sadness and grief have been compounded by being away from schools, work and peers; adjusting to new ways of learning and working; and anticipating loss of economic, social and emotional stability. Most countries, including India and Bhutan have acknowledged this danger and initiated a helpline for those in need. There has been a conscious effort to destigmatize mental health and help the youth to access in-person or virtual counseling or therapy to help them cope.

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04   Opportunities and way forward

In discussing the way forward to address the concerns and issues voiced by the youth, the speakers highlighted the immense opportunity to think about what our priorities are and where our efforts would bring about the much needed changes. The pandemic has made us realize that although we are individuals, we are all a part of a wider community. Whether it is to simply survive or strive to bring about momentous change, we need to work with others and be able to collaborate effectively.

We need to reimagine the process of education and how day-to-day learning can take place outside of the formal schooling system. With the help of emerging technology, we are in the position to form learning communities with our peers based on our interests and choice of platform so that learning can be engaging and exciting. For example, online gamers can share the latest information and software among themselves via a gaming platform. At the same time, this is also an opportunity to address the widening mismatch between skill sets and employment opportunities. We need to continue investing heavily in upgrading our skill sets and recognize that the best way to stay relevant is to learn how to adapt to the constantly changing world around us.

We need to acknowledge the significant role of technology in the sharing of ideas and collaboration. Although digital addiction is a real issue, the benefits of technology are immense if used judiciously. Social media can be a powerful tool in creating an online community to discuss and share ideas on important issues pertaining to the youth. At the same time, youth forums and other platforms can be created to consolidate framing of ideas and design collaborative efforts. It was mentioned that through social media, we could further normalize discussing mental health by creating a platform for people to share their experiences. This would go a long way in sensitizing everyone in the community regarding the importance of socio-emotional support.

While deliberating on how the youth can come together and bring about meaningful change, speakers mentioned that volunteerism could be an important vehicle to give back to the community. Voluntary efforts by the youth make sense during the pandemic because they fall in the low-risk category. And although the youth may not be able to contribute much in terms of financial support during the recovery of the economy, they can lower the burden on the state by

supplying human resources. Volunteerism will also prove beneficial for the youth because community work and service will aid in their leadership skill development and bring them closer to their community.

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05   Question-Answer session

After the three main areas of discussion, the speakers responded to questions posed by the audience. The questions dealt with diverse issues such as the environment, future of education, domestic violence and mental health.

The speakers felt that the lockdown across the globe has had a positive impact on the environment due to the reduction in economic activities and pollution. But many anticipated that as countries open up, governments would prioritize reviving the economy at the cost of the environment. However, the overall trend seemed to be positive with more and more youth displaying increasing sensitivity to the nature and understanding of the role of nature in their collective future. Youth activism for the environment across the globe is a good example of this trend.

The pandemic has changed the way educational institutions function and how day-to-day classroom instruction is delivered. When asked if digital classrooms are the future of education, speakers responded by saying that a blend of physical classroom and online teaching may be the way forward. However, before the potential of digital learning can be fully realized, there is a need to address the digital gap that exists in terms of access to technological resources. At the same time, educators and students need to be given support to enhance their technological capabilities. In order to ensure that education reaches everyone during this pandemic and beyond, all the stakeholders, such as governments, educational institutes, NGOs, private businesses and local communities, need to work together.

According to statistics, there has been a rise in domestic violence during the lockdown period. Speakers noted that there needs to be a concerted effort to raise awareness and educate the populace regarding this trend and delve deeper into the root causes. Immediate responses include providing easy access to hotlines and counsellors for those in need. For example, in Bhutan, the National Commission for Women and Children has been working towards raising awareness and educating people on what they can do to help as a community.

In dealing with mental health, the first big challenge is stigmatization. There needs to be more vigorous awareness campaigns to educate the populace and reach out to those in need. Those experiencing mental health issues should not be hesitant to ask for help or discuss their situations. At the same time, family members and peers need to be sensitized so that they are more equipped to deal with someone experiencing mental health issues. In both India and Bhutan, there are helplines that offer guidance and support for those in need.

The speakers felt that the lockdown across the globe has had a positive impact on the environment due to the reduction in economic activities and pollution.

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06   Conclusion

During the pandemic, most governments all over the world have diverted their attention to containing the spread of the virus and have primarily, quite rightly, focused on the health needs of its aging population. This, however, does not mean that the pressing needs of our youth have to be sidelined. It is imperative that we work together with the government to ensure that the needs of the youth are met and they are supported in their endeavour to be a positive force in their community, during and beyond this pandemic.

To watch the video of the webinar please **click here**

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