

Unlocking Pakistan's Youth Potential: A Comprehensive Analysis of Youth Development Indices and Strategic Alignment with the UN Sustainable Development Goals

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Abstract

Pakistan's youth, comprising 68% of the population, represents a critical demographic poised to drive economic growth or, if neglected, exacerbate socio-economic disparities. This article analyses youth development in Pakistan through four key indices: UNESCO Youth Development Index (YDI), Commonwealth Youth Development Index (CYDI), Global Youth Well-Being Index, and Youth Progress Index (YPI). These indices provide a comprehensive view of youth well-being across education, health, employment, and civic participation, highlighting significant gaps, particularly in education, healthcare, and gender equality. The YDI serves as a critical tool for identifying intervention areas, while the CYDI and Global Youth Well-Being Index emphasize enabling environments and gender equity. The YPI underscores the need for environmental sustainability and social inclusion in youth strategies. The findings lead to actionable recommendations for a holistic, inclusive approach to youth development, aligning with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). This study offers essential insights for policymakers, emphasizing the urgency of strategic, data-driven youth empowerment in Pakistan.

Keywords: Youth Development, Pakistan, UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), Youth Development Indices, Gender Equality.

Introduction

Youth represent one of the most critical demographic segments in any society, often referred to as the "demographic dividend" due to their potential to drive economic growth and social transformation (Bloom, (2003)). Pakistan, the fifth most populous country in the world, is home to a significant youth population, with 68% of its 215 million citizens under the age of 30 (Pakistan, (2022)). This "youth bulge" presents both an immense opportunity and a formidable challenge for the country. If effectively harnessed, this demographic advantage could propel Pakistan towards sustainable development, economic prosperity, and social stability. Conversely,

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if mismanaged, it could exacerbate existing socio-economic disparities, increase unemployment, and heighten social unrest (Bashir, Karim, & Baloch, 2022).

Despite the potential of this youthful population, Pakistan faces substantial challenges in translating this demographic asset into tangible development outcomes. The country ranks 154th out of 189 countries on the Human Development Index (HDI), with significant disparities in access to education, healthcare, and employment opportunities across different regions and income groups (UNESCO, (2020)). These disparities are further compounded by gender inequality, as Pakistan ranks 154th out of 189 countries on the Gender Inequality Index (GII) (Programme), (2020)). The multidimensional poverty rate stands at 38.8%, with alarming regional disparities, particularly in provinces like Balochistan, where the poverty rate is as high as 71% (UNFPA, (2022)). Such challenges underscore the need for a comprehensive, multi-faceted approach to youth development that addresses not only economic and educational needs but also health, social inclusion, and gender equality.

In this context, the importance of youth development indices becomes evident. These indices, such as the UNESCO Youth Development Index (YDI), the Commonwealth Youth Development Index (CYDI), and the Global Youth Well-Being Index, offer critical insights into the state of youth development across various dimensions, including education, health, employment, and civic participation (UNESCO, (2020)). By comparing these indices in the context of Pakistan, this article aims to assess how effectively the country is leveraging its youth potential and how well it aligns with global development benchmarks, particularly the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (Imrovič, Bočáková, & Levická, 2021).

The SDGs, adopted by all United Nations Member States in 2015, provide a universal blueprint for achieving a better and more sustainable future by 2030. Key SDGs relevant to youth development include SDG 3 (Good Health and Well-being), SDG 4 (Quality Education), SDG 5 (Gender Equality), SDG 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth), SDG 10 (Reduced Inequalities), and SDG 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions) (Pakistan, (2022)). These goals emphasize the need for inclusive, equitable, and quality development outcomes, particularly for vulnerable youth populations that leave no one behind (D. Ahmed, 2022).

This article will explore the current youth development in Pakistan, drawing on various youth-specific indices and evaluating their alignment with the SDGs. By doing so, it will highlight

the areas where Pakistan is progressing, the gaps that need to be addressed, and the policy interventions required to harness the full potential of its youth population (Pakistan, (2022)).

Youth Demographics in Pakistan: Statistical Overview and Implications for National Development

Youth demographics in Pakistan present a complex yet promising landscape that holds significant implications for the country’s future. With approximately 68% of its population under the age of 30, Pakistan stands at a crucial juncture where the effective management of this "youth bulge" could propel the nation towards sustained economic growth and social stability (Pakistan, (2022)). Conversely, failure to address the needs and aspirations of this demographic could exacerbate existing socio-economic challenges, leading to greater unemployment, social unrest, and a potential squandering of human capital (ur Rahman, Tahir, Wattoo, & Shahid, 2022).

Statistical Overview of the Youth Population in Pakistan

Pakistan's youth population, estimated to be around 146 million, is one of the largest in the world. This demographic is characterized by significant socio-economic diversity, with varying levels of access to education, employment, and healthcare across different regions. Urban areas like Karachi, Lahore, and Islamabad tend to offer better opportunities in terms of education and employment, whereas rural regions, particularly in provinces like Balochistan and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, face substantial challenges. These include higher rates of illiteracy, limited access to healthcare services, and fewer economic opportunities (Statistics, (2021)).

Literacy rates among Pakistani youth vary significantly by region and gender. Nationally, the youth literacy rate is approximately 72%, with male literacy at 79% and female literacy at 65% (UNESCO, 2020). However, these figures mask significant disparities: urban areas boast higher literacy rates, while rural regions, particularly in Baluchistan and Sindh, lag far behind. Gender disparities are also stark, with female literacy rates in rural Baluchistan as low as 24% (Statistics, (2021)).

Table 1: Gender-wise Age group distribution Pakistani population (2022)

Age Group	Male (%)	Female (%)
0-9	12.50%	12.00%
10-19	11.10%	9.90%
20-29	9.60%	8.80%

Age Group	Male (%)	Female (%)
30-39	6.60%	6.60%
40-49	4.60%	4.50%
50-59	3.30%	3.20%
60-69	2.20%	2.40%
70-79	0.80%	1.30%
80-89	0.30%	0.30%
90+	0.00%	0.00%
Total	51.00%	49.00%

Source: Population Pyramid of Pakistan 2022⁵

The above table presents the age and gender distribution within the population, reflecting the demographic characteristics typical of a developing nation. The wide base of the pyramid, representing a substantial proportion of the population in the 0-19 age group, indicates a high birth rate and a predominantly young population (Frohlich & Mustard, 1994). As the pyramid tapers towards the top, it reveals a smaller percentage of older individuals, consistent with higher fertility and mortality rates (Nations, 2015). The balanced gender representation across most age groups, with slight variations, suggests an almost equal distribution of males and females (Lipshitz & Raveh, 1998). The significant proportion of the working-age population (15-64 years) presents an opportunity for economic growth, but it also underscores the need for substantial investments in education, healthcare, and employment to harness this potential demographic dividend (Bank, (2020)). Addressing these challenges is crucial for Pakistan's sustainable development (Oktavian, Giyanto, & Saksono, 2022).

The socio-economic characteristics of Pakistan's youth are shaped by regional variations in income, education, and employment opportunities. In urban centers, youth are more likely to access quality education and secure employment in formal sectors (Lavrinenko, Tinyakova, Kalashnikov, & Novikov, 2019). However, in rural areas, where agriculture remains the dominant industry, young people often lack the skills and opportunities required to transition into higher-

⁵ <https://www.populationpyramid.net/pakistan/2022/>

paying jobs. Additionally, rural youth are more susceptible to poverty, with limited access to social services, including healthcare and vocational training programs (Bank, (2021))

The economic opportunities available to youth in Pakistan are influenced by the country's overall economic performance and regional disparities. Youth unemployment remains a significant challenge, with rates estimated at 8.5%, and underemployment is pervasive, particularly among young women and in rural areas ((ILO), (2021)). Vocational training programs are often underfunded and poorly aligned with market needs, further exacerbating the disconnect between education and employment (Tremblay, Ross, & Berthelot, 2002).

Implications of the Youth Bulge for National Development

The youth bulge in Pakistan presents both opportunities and challenges for national development. On the one hand, a large, youthful population can drive economic growth through increased labor force participation and innovation. On the other hand, without adequate investment in education, healthcare, and employment, this demographic dividend could become a demographic disaster, characterized by widespread unemployment, poverty, and social unrest.

To harness the potential of its youth, Pakistan must prioritize key elements of youth development, including access to quality education, health and well-being, economic opportunities, social development, leadership and empowerment, and moral and ethical development. Improving access to quality education and vocational training, enhancing healthcare services, promoting entrepreneurship, and fostering civic engagement are critical to ensuring that Pakistani youth can contribute meaningfully to the country's socio-economic progress (Khan et al., 2016).

The leadership and empowerment of youth are particularly important in this context. By equipping young people with the necessary skills and opportunities to participate in decision-making processes, Pakistan can cultivate a generation of leaders who are capable of driving the nation towards sustainable development. Furthermore, fostering moral and ethical development through education and community involvement will be essential in creating a socially responsible and engaged youth population.

In conclusion, the youth demographics in Pakistan represent a pivotal factor in the country's future development. By addressing the socio-economic disparities and regional variations that characterize this demographic, and by focusing on the key elements of youth

development, Pakistan can transform its youth bulge into a powerful engine for national growth and prosperity.

Introduction to Youth Development Indices

Youth development indices are critical tools for assessing and comparing the status of young people across various dimensions of well-being, including education, health, employment, and civic participation. These indices provide a quantitative framework that enables policymakers, researchers, and development practitioners to monitor progress, identify gaps, and implement targeted interventions. Among the most widely recognized youth-specific indices are the UNESCO Youth Development Index (YDI), the Commonwealth Youth Development Index (CYDI), the Global Youth Well-Being Index, and the Youth Progress Index (YPI). Each of these indices offers unique insights into the challenges and opportunities faced by youth globally, with particular relevance to developing countries like Pakistan, where the youth population represents a significant demographic group.

These indices not only facilitate international comparisons but also highlight the importance of investing in youth as a key driver of sustainable development. By focusing on various dimensions of youth well-being, these indices help to shed light on the multifaceted nature of youth development, which encompasses not only economic and educational outcomes but also social inclusion, gender equality, and health. In the context of Pakistan, where the youth bulge presents both opportunities and challenges, these indices are particularly relevant for guiding national policies and strategies aimed at empowering young people and integrating them into the broader socio-economic fabric of the country.

Key Youth Development Indices

UNESCO Youth Development Index (YDI)

The UNESCO Youth Development Index (YDI) is a comprehensive measure that assesses the status of young people across five key domains: education, health and well-being, employment and opportunity, political participation, and civic participation. The YDI aims to provide a holistic view of youth development by capturing both the opportunities available to young people and their actual outcomes in these areas (Popovici et al., 2022). It is designed to complement other development indices, such as the Human Development Index (HDI), by focusing specifically on the youth population. The YDI is particularly significant for developing countries, as it highlights areas where targeted interventions are needed to improve the prospects of young people. In the

context of Pakistan, the YDI underscores the need for enhanced efforts in education, healthcare, and employment to harness the potential of the country's large youth population (Van der Straaten, 2020).

Commonwealth Youth Development Index (CYDI)

The Commonwealth Youth Development Index (CYDI) was developed by the Commonwealth Secretariat to measure the development and well-being of youth across member countries (Daskou & Tzokas, 2022). It is structured around five key domains: education, health and well-being, employment, political participation, and civic participation. The CYDI is unique in that it not only measures outcomes but also the enabling environments that support youth development (Hameed, Padda, & Karim, 2022). This index draws on data from international organizations such as the United Nations and the World Bank, making it a robust tool for cross-country comparisons. For Pakistan, the CYDI highlights significant disparities in youth development, particularly in areas such as political participation and employment, where the country lags behind its regional counterparts (Wahyuni, 2021).

Global Youth Well-Being Index

The Global Youth Well-Being Index, developed by the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) and the International Youth Foundation, offers a broader perspective on youth development by incorporating indicators related to economic opportunity, education, health, safety and security, information and communication technology (ICT), and gender equality (Tlemsani, Zaman, Mohamed Hashim, & Matthews, 2022). This index is particularly valuable for understanding the multi-dimensional aspects of youth well-being and for identifying areas where young people face systemic challenges. In Pakistan, the Global Youth Well-Being Index points to critical issues such as gender inequality and limited access to quality education and healthcare, which continue to hinder the overall development of the youth population (Statistics, (2021)).

Youth Progress Index (YPI)

The Youth Progress Index (YPI), developed by the European Youth Forum, is another significant measure that focuses on the social and environmental factors affecting youth. It evaluates youth well-being across three dimensions: basic human needs, foundations of well-being, and opportunities (Malchow, 2022). The YPI is unique in its emphasis on the environmental and social determinants of youth development, which are often overlooked in other indices. In the

context of Pakistan, the YPI highlights the importance of addressing environmental sustainability and social inclusion as part of the broader youth development agenda (ESCAP, 2022). The index also underscores the need for a more equitable distribution of resources to ensure that all young people, regardless of their socio-economic background, have access to the opportunities necessary for their development (Razzaq et al., 2020).

Compare, Contrast, and Critical Analysis of Youth Development Indices

The UNESCO Youth Development Index (YDI) and the Commonwealth Youth Development Index (CYDI) share a common focus on measuring youth development across key domains such as education, health, and employment (Kaczan & Patil, 2020). However, while the YDI provides a global perspective, the CYDI is more tailored to the specific needs and contexts of Commonwealth countries. The CYDI's emphasis on enabling environments and political participation distinguishes it from the YDI, which focuses more on outcomes rather than the processes that lead to those outcomes. In the context of Pakistan, both indices highlight significant gaps in education and employment, but the CYDI provides additional insights into the structural factors that contribute to these challenges (Kamran, Rafique, Nadeem, & Anwar, 2022).

The Global Youth Well-Being Index and the Youth Progress Index (YPI) offer broader perspectives by incorporating dimensions such as ICT and environmental sustainability. The Global Youth Well-Being Index, with its focus on economic opportunity and gender equality, is particularly relevant for countries like Pakistan, where gender disparities and economic challenges are pervasive (Tok, Yesuf, & Mohamed, 2022). The YPI's inclusion of environmental and social factors adds another layer of complexity to the analysis, emphasizing the importance of sustainability and social equity in youth development (Imtiaz et al., 2020).

In comparing these indices, the UNESCO YDI stands out for its comprehensive approach to measuring youth development across multiple dimensions (Amjad & Danish). Its significance in the context of Pakistan cannot be overstated, as it provides a clear framework for identifying the areas where the country needs to invest to realize the potential of its youth (Ali & Khan, 2022). The YDI's focus on both opportunities and outcomes makes it a valuable tool for policymakers seeking to design targeted interventions that address the specific needs of young people (Umair, 2022). However, the limitations of the YDI, such as its reliance on available data and the exclusion of certain socio-cultural factors, should be acknowledged. The inclusion of more localized data

and a deeper focus on cultural contexts could enhance its relevance for countries like Pakistan (Goldin, 2014).

Overall, while each index offers unique insights into youth development, the UNESCO YDI's comprehensive nature makes it particularly valuable for assessing the overall status of youth in Pakistan. Its findings can serve as a basis for developing policies and programs that address the critical needs of young people, thereby contributing to the country's broader development goals (Ahmed & Karim, 2022).

Implications for Youth Development in Pakistan

The comparative analysis of the various youth development indices—UNESCO Youth Development Index (YDI), Commonwealth Youth Development Index (CYDI), Global Youth Well-Being Index, and Youth Progress Index (YPI)—highlights the multifaceted nature of youth development and the diverse challenges faced by young people in Pakistan (POLYDOROU). Each index provides a unique lens through which the complexities of youth development can be understood, offering valuable insights into different dimensions such as education, health, economic opportunity, and social inclusion (Constant).

In the context of Pakistan, the UNESCO YDI emerges as a particularly significant tool due to its comprehensive coverage of critical domains that directly impact youth development. The YDI's holistic approach, which includes education, health, employment, political, and civic participation, aligns closely with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), making it a crucial framework for guiding policy decisions (Awais, 2022). The index's ability to highlight disparities and pinpoint areas requiring intervention is invaluable for a country like Pakistan, where regional and gender inequalities pose substantial barriers to youth empowerment (Aaqil, Mahmood, Shoaib, & Jamil, 2022).

However, while the YDI offers a broad and inclusive overview, the other indices, such as the CYDI and the Global Youth Well-Being Index, provide complementary insights that are essential for a more nuanced understanding of the youth development landscape in Pakistan (Sachs, Kroll, Lafortune, Fuller, & Woelm, 2022). The CYDI's focus on enabling environments, particularly in the realm of political participation, underscores the importance of creating supportive structures that allow young people to engage meaningfully in civic life. This is particularly relevant in Pakistan, where political and civic participation among youth remains low,

and where there is a pressing need for policies that encourage and facilitate youth involvement in governance and decision-making processes (Kumar & Chatterjee, 2022).

The Global Youth Well-Being Index and the YPI further enrich the discussion by incorporating additional dimensions such as gender equality, ICT access, and environmental sustainability. These aspects are critical for a comprehensive understanding of youth development in the modern context, where digital inclusion and sustainable development are increasingly recognized as pivotal factors in ensuring long-term well-being. In Pakistan, where access to ICT and environmental challenges are significant concerns, these indices offer valuable perspectives that can help shape more effective and forward-looking youth policies (Tohit & Haque, 2022).

Recommendations for Policy and Practice

Given the insights provided by these indices, it is clear that Pakistan's youth development strategy must be multi-dimensional, addressing not only traditional areas like education and employment but also broader issues such as gender equality, ICT access, environmental sustainability, and political participation (Ikram, Kenayathulla, & Saleem, 2022). The following recommendations emerge from the analysis:

1. **Enhance Data Collection and Use:** To improve the relevance and accuracy of youth development indices like the YDI in the Pakistani context, there is a need for better data collection and disaggregation, particularly at the provincial and district levels. This will allow for more targeted interventions that address the specific needs of youth in different regions (Khushik, 2021).
2. **Invest in Education and Vocational Training:** Education remains a critical area of concern. There is a need for increased investment in both formal education and vocational training programs that are aligned with market demands. This will help bridge the gap between education and employment and reduce youth unemployment (Khan et al., 2016).
3. **Promote Gender Equality:** Addressing gender disparities is crucial for the overall development of youth. Policies should focus on enhancing female literacy rates, reducing gender-based violence, and promoting the inclusion of young women in all sectors of society (S Mirza, 2021).
4. **Strengthen Political and Civic Participation:** Encouraging youth participation in political processes and civic life is essential for fostering a sense of agency and

responsibility among young people. This can be achieved through education, awareness campaigns, and the creation of platforms for youth engagement (Wood, 2022).

5. **Focus on ICT and Digital Inclusion:** In today's digital age, access to information and communication technologies is a key determinant of youth development. Expanding ICT infrastructure and ensuring equitable access to digital tools and resources should be a priority (S Mirza, 2021).
6. **Integrate Environmental Sustainability into Youth Policies:** Given the growing importance of environmental issues, youth development strategies should include components that address environmental education and encourage sustainable practices among young people (Shahid, Polkinghorne, & Bobeva, 2022).

Conclusion

The youth demographic in Pakistan represents a critical and potentially transformative segment of the nation's population, one that holds the key to future prosperity and socio-economic development. However, realizing this potential requires a nuanced and multi-dimensional approach to youth development—one that addresses the complex interplay of education, health, employment, social inclusion, and political participation. The comparative analysis of the UNESCO Youth Development Index (YDI), Commonwealth Youth Development Index (CYDI), Global Youth Well-Being Index, and Youth Progress Index (YPI) reveals both the strengths and the gaps in the current understanding of youth well-being in Pakistan.

The UNESCO YDI, with its comprehensive scope, provides a robust framework for assessing the overall status of youth development. It highlights the areas where Pakistan needs to intensify its efforts, particularly in education, health, and economic opportunities, to harness the potential of its youth population. However, this analysis also underscores the importance of looking beyond traditional indicators. The CYDI's focus on enabling environments and the Global Youth Well-Being Index's emphasis on gender equality and digital inclusion point to the need for policies that create a supportive infrastructure for youth development. Meanwhile, the YPI's attention to environmental sustainability and social inclusion reminds us that youth development must be viewed through a holistic lens, one that integrates socio-economic, environmental, and technological dimensions.

For Pakistan, the implications of this analysis are clear. To fully capitalize on its youth bulge, the country must prioritize a comprehensive youth development strategy that is aligned with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). This strategy must include targeted investments in education and vocational training, enhanced healthcare access, the promotion of gender equality, the expansion of ICT infrastructure, and the creation of platforms for youth engagement in political and civic life. Moreover, the collection and use of disaggregated data are critical for tailoring interventions to the diverse needs of Pakistan's youth across different regions and socio-economic groups.

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