

OPINION



BY ZUBEIDA MUSTAFA

Human side of jobs

A MAJOR challenge faced by Pakistan's economy today is one of providing opportunities for income generation to the fast-growing manpower. With the country's population escalating at the rate of 2 per cent per annum and three million young people coming of age every year the first priority is obviously job creation. But barely 700,000 new jobs are generated annually.

According to statistics given by Michael Kugelman of the Woodrow Wilson International Centre, Washington, this has led to a massive exodus of young people to cities and this has caused rapid urbanisation in the country which, in turn, has created difficulties of its own.

Unemployment is a serious problem. Jobs are needed not just to provide livelihood to people and their families, they are also needed because people with nothing to do can form a huge reservoir of discontent. Joblessness robs a person of his self-esteem and he has no stake in socio-economic development having been denied the sense of ownership and economic empowerment that a secure job gives a person.

This dimension of unemployment has not been understood in Pakistan though a lot has been written about its relationship to violence, terrorism and political unrest.

I first understood the relevance of gainful employment in the sense of the well-being of a person when I visited a labour training centre in Sweden in the 1980s when the country was solidly in the hands of the Social Democrats. The government would monitor the economy closely and keep an eye on the labour market. If one sector shrank and workers had to be laid off, another sector would expand and suffer a short supply of labour. That was when government intervention took place and people were offered training for jobs which were in greater supply.

The officer who briefed me focused more on the human psycho-social dimension than the economic aspect of employment. Twenty-five years later, this aspect of joblessness hit me starkly during a recent visit to Khairo Dero (Larkana district) where the Ali Hasan Mangi Memorial Trust (AHMMT) is working for the uplift of people there.

I was told that unemployment was a major problem and that jobless men whiled away their time gambling and taking drugs. This inevitably boosted the addiction rate while driving down economic productivity. Naweem Mangi, who runs the Trust with remarkable efficiency, offered to introduce me to a group of men to help me assess their perceptions. One evening I was invited to meet 15 or so men of all ages.

I asked them to introduce themselves and describe their job status. Ten of them said

they were 'beyrozgaar' (unemployed). On probing further I felt that many of them were actually underemployed as they worked occasionally when a job was available. However, their earnings were not enough to feed their families. The others had some job or the other but did not feel fulfilled. Perhaps they did not have enough work to occupy them for a full day.

One was a health worker who was called upon to help when needed for a vaccination drive and was paid accordingly. Two labourers had to try their luck daily and sometimes they had no work for several days. The two clerks in government offices and the two teachers in public-sector schools probably did minimum work.

That left only a farm worker cultivating a three-acre plot and a salesman selling plastic ware as the two claiming to be employed. What surprised me most was the apathy and lack of motivation that marked their approach. They said that hope was keeping them alive. When asked to elucidate what

Certain aspects of joblessness are disregarded.

they hoped for, they told me that they looked forward to better days when their party came to power. Which party were they waiting for? The PPP they informed me. They had no answer when told that the PPP had been in power in

Sindh since 2008.

It appears that unemployment is linked to a state of mind. In the absence of an economic boom lethargy has set in. Whatever little initiative was left has been destroyed by drugs and gambling. Lack of education and socio-economic stagnation — for which the government is wholly responsible — have made matters worse.

Women who have suffered centuries of oppression in a patriarchal society are, on the contrary, more active and dynamic. Many have become community workers and teachers. Others have set up home-based handicraft businesses with the help of AHMMT's micro-credit scheme to transform their lives. The women's approach to income generation is more positive. Since 2011, 34 loans of Rs15,000 each have been extended and 14 have been repaid. There have been no defaulters which points to the success of the project.

A push is needed to draw men into employment. Land reforms and small agro industries could provide income-generation opportunities and motivation for the jobless. ■