

PRESS RELEASE

21st August, 2020: Youth Economic Forum (YEF) “Live Session Series” in collaboration with DBTV discussed the ‘Potential of Digitization and Technology in Pakistan’, taking into account the current COVID-19 situation. Targeting the youth of Pakistan, the YEF carries its mission of providing youth with a platform to voice up and bridge the gap between them and the policy makers. This pandemic has pushed us towards a more digitalized world, and not even the tech titans have managed to fast forward the technology like the Coronavirus has. Technology is widely used for education, business and entertainment as people are now increasingly using online orders, online health care and so on. This session will discuss the uses and difficulties of digitization and technology in Pakistan.

The session was moderated by Jamal Nasir (PR Associate at YEF) and included a discussion between Barkan Saeed (CEO Vizteck), Abeer Mumtaz Rajper (currently a lecturer and Masters Graduate in Social Policy and Development from London School of Economics and Political Sciences) and Mominah Kamran (student of Public Policy at National University of Science and Technology).

Barkan started by talking about whether the business sector in particular had made an effective use of online platforms in Pakistan. “It depends on the sector” said Barkan, the IT sector particularly didn’t face any issues working from home, as it made an effective use of online platforms like Zoom etc, however traditional businesses who were new to online platforms for meetings have relatively “suffered a lot.. And it wasn’t easy for 85-95% of the working class” added Barkan.

Moreover, some businesses working remotely were able to expand their sales by 10 times using effective techniques on online platforms.

Then the effectiveness of online platforms and digital technology in Pakistan’s education sector during COVID-19 was discussed. “The response has been far from satisfactory” said Abeer, as we know that education and internet access is basic human right and “unfortunately Pakistan has been fairing badly in regards to both of these” she added. There is a large divide in rural and urban sector. Rural areas face more difficulty in accessing internet compared to urban areas. Private sectors have had a lot more investments so they easily managed online platforms within a few days, whereas public sector education faced difficulties. Pakistan has some of the world’s worst education indicators even before the pandemic and these are now being exacerbated due to the pandemic. Reports from Gilgit Baltistan and Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa have shown that students have a longer commute as they now have to cover longer distances in order to gain internet access for online classes. “On average there is one smart phone available for 10 children” says Abeer. Since 40 million children have access to television sets, government took the initiative to start Teleschool through PTV World from grade 1-12 (broadcasted hourly).

On the contrary, universities like NUST have been very considerate regarding the online learning platforms, which has been an effective policy. “However, at the same time Pakistan doesn’t have proper infrastructure for internet” said Momina, which has been even more highlighted in this pandemic. NUST has used a USB to record its lectures and assignments for students located in rural areas with lack of internet access, however this a short term approach, hence there is a need for the government to plan out a long term approach.

Internet can be used as a training tool for students/fresh graduates/young professionals in a job market that neglects training programs for inexperienced job seekers. A lot of scope of development is needed in this area. Government should come up with solutions, like Pakistan’s education minister Shafqat Mehmood has also realized the importance of this. Universities should further use research programs, mentor engagement programs etc for long term effectiveness. There is a lot of scope for development, and investment is required.

For the job sector Barkan emphasized on training the youth and developing their skills. Government needs a very high priority planning and budgeting as it has proved to be non-serious according to Barkan. Professionals in the IT industry like in India are better employed than in Pakistan as they have worked on their skills and created a skill based economy. There is potential in Pakistan but a lot of training and focus is required. Government needs to do this as the private sector has failed to do so. Even though PTI claimed to work on digital technology, no major change has taken place in the last 2 years and government has failed in the digital side according to Barkan. Government services need to be digitally available, for example, software technology parks are needed, mass level digital training programs need to be initiated etc. However, Momina disagreed with Barkan and discussed how government is currently helping develop digital

infrastructure in Pakistan, as NUST recently launched the National Science and Technology park with a lot of investments done by government policies so “we do have hope atleast that something is going to come about” said Momina, digitization has resulted in more conceptual questions as teachers are now adapting newer and effective methods of teaching on online platforms. “A more macro approach is needed for this problem to be solved” added Momina. Abeer then stressed on Barkan’s view on digital policy, saying that a very few policies have been implemented. “Internet quartile was 76 out of 100 in Pakistan this year” said Abeer. A lot of areas have internet blackouts along with lack of internet access in Balochistan, Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa and Gilgit-Baltistan, so the government needs to prepare itself and take long term measures now because the future resides in digitization and technological improvements. Far from satisfactory initiatives have not taken place; this was clearly evident when the pandemic hit the country as well. The government needs to make this policy inclusive of all Pakistani citizens, not only those who have the luxury to afford it in urban areas. Less inclusiveness of the policies made is increasing the gender divide, as 37% women are less likely to own and have access to mobile phones. So in order for all Pakistanis to have access to technology government needs to take into account economic factors. There’s no going back, COVID has pushed the need for technology sooner than later. Each province and federal capital will have to work on this. Education sector in Punjab is growing more than Gilgit-Baltistan. So if it won’t be inclusive now then there will be a greater problem later.

“Bitcoin, YouTube and TikTok have nothing to do with digitization” says Barkan. Bitcoin is used by criminals and hackers as it is non traceable, so to allow Bitcoin in Pakistan from a defense point of view is dangerous. “Policy decisions for TikTok should come from the government and not from the courts” added Barkan, as countries like China and India have successfully made their own safe online platforms. Pakistani government can adapt this approach and develop platforms on the side so that the youth can benefit from it.

Abeer then discussed the importance of digital literacy i.e., knowing how to open Google or operate a computer and so on. Thus investing in technological companies is very important for Pakistan. We need to focus on public education sector as our major population is here. Political will needs to transform Pakistan’s digital internet infrastructure. “World Bank has stated that Pakistan is unfortunately one of the worst countries when it comes to developing internet infrastructure” said Abeer.

Lastly, Momina stressed that the use of technology in this pandemic is useful as it helps university students attend online lectures more conveniently now as NUST has recently collaborated with Coursera that provides easy access to all the courses through a license that also provides certificate that’s helps improve student’s skills. Hence giving an opportunity to students and teachers who have access, to expand their knowledge and use these skills in the future more technically advanced world.