

PRESS RELEASE

8th December 2020: Youth Economic Forum's (YEF) "Live Session Series" in collaboration with DBTV discussed the clean water supply in Pakistan and the economic impact of it. The guest speakers in the session were representing Aqua-The Pure, a social action project by students of NUML. The Project Director, Ms. Hafsa Saboor along with Mr. Sabit Hussain, Director Finance and Mr. Hamza Khan, the ambassador of Aqua- The Pure shed light on the research done by them regarding the challenges faced by Pakistan with respect to clean water availability and the implication of the lack of such facilities. The seminar was hosted by Mr. Jamal Nasir, PR Associate at YEF.

The session started with the significance and aim of initiatives that spread awareness regarding clean water usage and the experience of this process with reference to the project. Ms. Hafsa Saboor told the process of choosing clean water for her project which consisted of research that showed an alarming situation of clean water's availability in Pakistan. Some of the baseline statistics highlighted by her were 80% of Pakistan's population is using unsafe water, 40% deaths are due to diseases caused by contaminated water and yearly 53,000 to 55,000 children die due to unclean water which made her realize the gravity and extent of the problem. She further mentioned that just in Islamabad, where the project is functional, there is a huge population living in illegal slums that use unclean water sources hence the situation in far-flung areas and water-scarce areas like Thal and Thar is way worse. She also highlighted the grave economic implications of inaccessibility of clean water which causes around 1.44% loss in GDP every year.

When asked about the level of public awareness regarding the issue Mr. Hamza Latif said that the public remains vastly unaware of the diseases caused by water contamination. He added that even though the poor suffer from diseases such as cholera, diarrhea, dysentery, hepatitis A etc. which are primarily caused by unclean water, they are unable to connect it to the cause and suffer immensely. Furthermore, he said that people are also unaware of the source and quality of water they are using as well as the basic method of boiling water to remove bacteria. He pointed out that limited work is being done to spread awareness which is the primary cause of people living in such poor conditions. While discussing the economic effects of such conditions, Mr. Hamza said that the public economy is being damaged, additional expenses on healthcare increase poverty and the financial strain on the poor due to unexpected expenses worsens their situation. Moreover, the amount of Arsenic and pH levels in underground water are cancer-causing which is a substantial, long-term cost on not just the household but the economy.

While discussing the aim of Aqua- The Pure Ms. Hafsa stated that the area they are targeting is Union Council-12 in Rawat which comes under the Capital Development Authority. Socio-economic research in that area which has a population of around 9000, has concluded that 60% earn below 13,000 and 30-40% earn below 9,000 per month, signaling to poor living conditions. Collecting surveys from the doctors of that area has helped derive alarming conclusions; 8/10 pregnant women get sick due to water borne diseases, 2/5 children die of these diseases and 6/10 daily cases are due to contaminated water. The conditions of this area make it a priority target.

The Director Finance, Mr. Sabit disclosed that as a student, he has faced hurdles gaining sponsorships for the project. He pointed out a serious issue they faced whilst choosing the target area was that the slum areas in the capital such as the ones situated in H-9 and I-9 were illegal, hence public and private entities would not finance any projects in the development of that area which is why they targeted UC-12 instead. Moreover, due to the mechanistic structure of governmental institutions, the tall hierarchy as well as the lack of communication and collaborative platforms, their project had major difficulty securing funds from the public sector. The strict systems in place for funding by private sectors along with the ongoing pandemic, private organizations are hesitant to fund their projects as well.

When asked about the importance of the government's role, Mr. Hamza stated that last government's 'Saaf Paani Program' was shut down due to political differences. He also stated that according to a survey if the government does not take rapid action, then by 2025, clean water will run out. Being an Agriculture-based economy, Pakistan's GDP will suffer even more in case of shortage of clean water. The absence of a pro-active national policy for water recycling, storage, filtration and access is alarming. He pointed out that awareness regarding unclean water consumption will help at the grassroots level and inaction will lead to devastating results directly and indirectly.

Final comments by the panelists concluded that for the sustainability, safety and security of the country, the SDG goal of clean accessible water needs to be taken seriously and policies to increase the 30-day clean water storage capacity, registration of slums and maintenance of previous filtration plants is the need of the hour.