



A 'duet' for India's urban women

Bottom line: Public works could provide valuable support to the urban poor, especially if women get most of the jobs.

The plight of Urban Poor

1. The COVID-19 crisis has drawn attention to the insecurities that haunt the lives of the urban poor.
2. The urban poor is exposed to serious contingencies, both individual (such as illness and underemployment) and collective (lockdowns, floods, cyclones, financial crises and so on).

Urban Employment Guarantee Needed

1. There is, thus, a need for better social protection in urban areas.
2. Universalising the Public Distribution System in urban slums would be a step forward (and it can be done under the National Food Security Act), but food grain rations do not take people very far.
3. Employment-based support is one way of doing more. It has two major advantages: self-targeting, and the possibility of generating valuable assets or services.

DUET Scheme: a stepping stone towards Urban Employment Guarantee

1. Some time Jean dreze had proposed an urban employment scheme called Decentralised Urban Employment and Training (DUET).
2. The government, State or Union, would issue "job stamps", each standing for one day of work at the minimum wage.
3. The job stamps would be liberally distributed to approved public institutions such as universities, hostels, schools, hospitals, public-sector enterprises, neighbourhood associations and urban local bodies.
4. These institutions would be free to use the stamps to hire labour. Wages, paid by the government, would go directly to the workers' accounts against job stamps certified by the employer.
5. To avoid collusion, an independent placement agency would take charge of assigning workers to employers.



Benefits

1. This approach would have various advantages: activating a multiplicity of potential employers, avoiding the need for special staff, facilitating productive work, among others. It would also ensure that workers have a secure entitlement to minimum wages, and possibly other benefits.
2. There is no dearth of possible DUET jobs. Many possibilities are mentioned in Azim Premji University's blueprint for an urban employment guarantee act.
3. Further, many States have a chronic problem of dismal maintenance of public premises — DUET could provide the first line of defence against it.

Of course, many practical issues are likely to arise in the design of the scheme. But the idea seems worth pursuing at least.

Women first variant of DUET and its Social Implications:

1. As long as women workers are available, they get all the work. In fact, women could also run the placement agencies or the entire programme for that matter.
2. To facilitate women's involvement, most of the work could be organised on a part-time basis, say four hours a day. Full-time employment tends to be very difficult for them, especially if they have young children.
3. It would give them some economic independence and bargaining power within the family, and help them to acquire new skills.
4. Remember, the economic dependence of women on men is one of the prime roots of gender inequality and female oppression in India.

Social Implications

India has one of the lowest rates of female workforce participation in the world. According to National Sample Survey data for 2019, only 20% of urban women in the age group of 15-59 years spend time in "employment and related activities" on an average day. This is a loss not only for women, who live at the mercy of men but also for society as a whole, insofar as it stifles the productive and creative potential of almost half of the adult population.



Investing in India's youth

Context: With the largest youth population in the world, India faces the difficult task of educating every citizen to become a productive member of society. This goal has become harder with the pandemic: over 320 million learners have been affected and more than 5 million young people are likely to have lost their jobs. Proactive measures need to be taken to resolve this situation. Education can play a vital role in bridging this gap.

Relevance in 21st century: Skill Development vs Education

India's Right to Education Act guarantees free and compulsory education for the ages of 6 to 14 years and is based on books and written examinations. However, evidence shows that many people develop 21st-century skills on the job, or from courses that focus on the practical application of skills. This indicates that vocational education can be a route for many to gain specific skill sets and knowledge which they can directly apply in their jobs. Such education formats are referred to as Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET).

Towards a Skill capital

1. In India, the skills development ecosystem has undergone rapid changes and improvements over the last decade.
2. The National Skill Development Policy was launched in 2009 and revamped in 2015, recognising the challenge of skilling with speed and high standards.
3. The Skill India Mission was launched with a vision for making India the "skill capital" of the world.

UNESCO's State of the Education Report for India 2020

Making Vocational Education Attractive

1. One of the biggest challenges for expanding the reach of TVET-related courses has been the lack of aspiration and stigma attached to jobs such as carpentry and tailoring.
2. Information campaigns involving youth role models would go a long way in improving the image of vocational education.
3. Research is now proving that TVET graduates for entry-level jobs can get paid as much as university graduates, and for some jobs can even surpass them. Moreover, students from vocational streams typically take less time to find jobs as compared to university graduates.



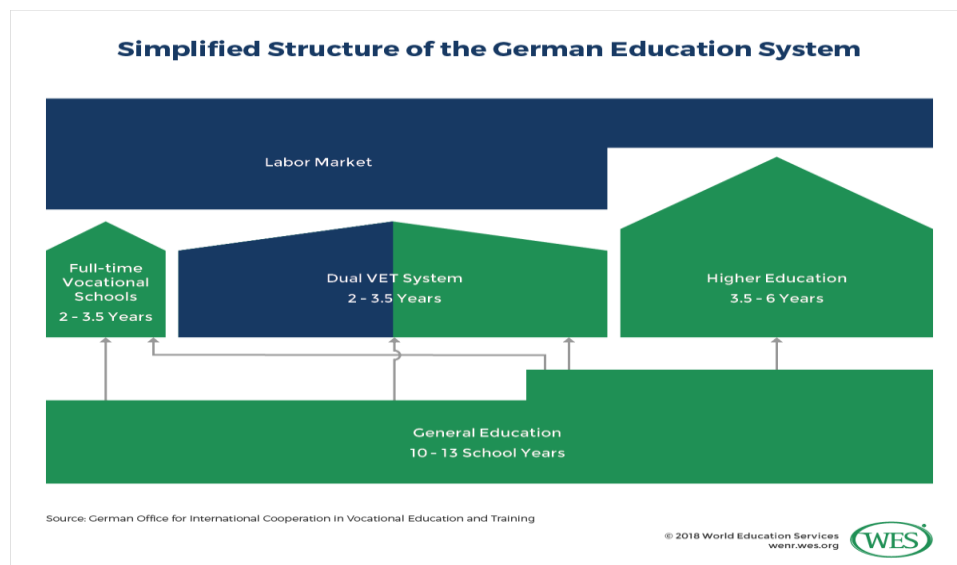
4. The report emphasises the need for expanding evidence-based research which can add value to all aspects of TVET like its attractiveness as a career, planning and delivery.
5. For instance, proving the business case of apprenticeship to employers can push them to hire more apprentices. Considering that many employers are unable to find skilled candidates for jobs, promoting skills development and hiring skilled workers can make the economy stronger.

An ambitious target

1. The new National Education Policy (NEP) aims to provide vocational education to 50% of all learners by 2025. Schools are encouraged to provide students access to vocational education from Grade 6 onwards and to offer courses that are aligned to the local economies and can benefit local communities.
2. This will be possible only if the existing skills development systems are leveraged effectively. Hence, for the vision of the NEP to be fulfilled, a robust coordination mechanism for inter-ministerial cooperation is necessary for bringing the skills development and vocational education systems together.
3. UNESCO (through its evidence-based policy instruments) can support the Indian government in capitalising on the country's demographic dividend.

Background:

1. Best Practice across the world: German Dual Model of VET





Mains:

1. Despite Skill India Mission, a dedicated ministry and various other efforts skilling is not picking up in India. Critically discuss and suggest reforms.

The ground has fallen out from beneath the farmer's feet

Bottom line: The Farm Acts are farmer-unfriendly and in violation of important constitutional safeguards

Issues

1. All three of these laws are palpable attempts to turn the activity of buying and selling farm produce into a form of stock exchange trade, which will not ensure remunerative prices to farmers.
2. It will also be difficult to understand the contractual text for farmers, they are most likely to be on the disadvantage. This lack of skill, knowledge and expertise will provoke farmers into hiring lawyers, thereby, increasing the operational cost for the farmer or, in the alternative, open the floodgates of their exploitation at any time by such companies.
3. The Acts have been passed by the Centre. However, agriculture remains a matter under the purview of the State List. The Centre has no jurisdiction to rule over agriculture even under the Concurrent List.
4. Additionally, the Acts deprive States of their revenue via any cess or levy. Therefore, these Acts are a challenge to the separation of powers which functions as the backbone to a democracy.

Gaps in definitions and other deficiencies

1. When these Acts define the term, "farmer", they exclude the cropper, labourer, tiller, etc. This shall, in turn, hinder, any rights that they might have gained access to via the Acts.
2. While defining a "farming agreement," rather than bestowing power to the farmer, a sponsor has the power to refuse the yield without giving reasons to the farmer behind such refusal.
3. This sponsor is also in-charge for checking legal compliance. This means that all legal blind-turns are open to legitimate exploitation by such sponsors.



4. The Acts mandate trade to occur when the produce is of a “mutually acceptable quality, grade and standard.” In the attempt to secure produce of a “mutually acceptable quality”, there is every possibility that the farmer might be pressured into over-using his land either by excess plantation or by excessive use of chemicals, thus making it vulnerable to becoming barren.
5. Moreover, the quality check in such cases is to be done by a “third party”. This power has been given to a third party without any safeguards against such parties’ biases or prejudices.
6. The Acts in their dispute resolution provisions, fail to lay down who can represent the parties involved in such a dispute. The Act goes on to then to overburden an already overworked Sub-Divisional Magistrate in the absence of such a conciliation process elucidated in the farming agreement.
7. And, finally, the most inhumane of all provisions are those that take away the right of appeal from a farmer against the order of the SDM.
8. Apart from this, the Acts use multiple subjective terms such as “extraordinary circumstances” and “extraordinary price rise” which can be misused.

Constitutional Breaches

1. Legally, all of this interferes with the freedom of a farmer to carry out his own trade under Article 19(1)(f).
2. By imposing such fetters in the way that the farmer earns his livelihood, there is a threat under Article 21 as well.
3. This will also deny a decent standard of living by interfering in the way that such a ‘living’ is earned by the farmer, impinging on Article 43 of the Directive Principles of State Policy.
4. By denying appeal to farmers the access to justice accorded by the Constitution under Articles 14 and 21 is also violated

Predicting protein structures

Significance of Protein Structures

1. Just as knowing the shape of the human nose or the crow’s beak helps understand its function, knowing a protein structure helps recognise how it functions and how a defect may lead to malfunctioning.



2. Proteins are ubiquitous in all organisms. By comparing and analysing protein structures, it is possible to get ideas about biological evolution, diseases, defence mechanisms, etc. This explains the human quest for finding the structures of proteins.

Enter AI

Now, The AI-based program, AlphaFold2, from the company DeepMind, has stunned the world by accurately and quickly predicting the structure of proteins, starting from the sequences of amino acids that constitute them.

Background:

Indian Legacy

India has had a legacy of being a top player in the field of protein structural work, both experimental and computational. The Ramachandran plot devised nearly 60 years ago by G.N. Ramachandran and others from the University of Madras are used even today the world over to validate protein structures.