



The challenge of unemployment

By Moniza Inam

A heart-rending report was published in the newspapers recently. It was about a young man, Fahim, who committed suicide because of his financial difficulties and unemployment. He was only 28. Jobless for weeks and unable to support his family he thought it fit to free himself of the misery. After his death, the distressed family didn't have any money and the neighbours arranged his funeral.

This news story, however, is not an isolated piece. We read off and on about people who commit suicide in the prime of their lives, leaving their grieving families to fend for themselves against poverty, inflation and unemployment.

Fahim and countless others in similar circumstances are regarded as unknown soldiers who lost their lives in a silent but effective demonstration against what can be termed anti-poor policies and economic repression. As Faiz Ahmed Faiz famously asked, Tujh ko kitnon ka lahu chahiye ai arz-i-watan/ jo teri arz-i-berang ko gulnaar karein/ kitni aahon se kaleja tera thanda hoga/ kitne aansoo tere sehraon ko gulzaar karein? (How much blood do you need, homeland, to lift up your colourless mass? How many sighs to soothe your heart, how many tears to make your deserts green?)

The vigorous economic growth in the last eight years has failed to make an impact on the lives of the ordinary people. They are being crushed under the weight of rising cost of living, insecurity, acts of terrorism, bad governance, judicial and democratic crises, and inequitable and arbitrary government policies. All these factors have combined to widen the gap between the haves and the have-nots.

Of late the government which has been traditionally a major employer has slowed down recruitment. To make matters worse, during the last decade, thousands of people lost their jobs in the name of downsizing, right-sizing and smart-sizing in public sector banks, corporations and industries. Workers displaced by mechanisation are least likely to find new jobs.

According to a study by the Asian Development Bank, unemployment has been higher during the last two years as compared with the first eight years of the last decade. It reveals that overall unemployment rate in the country declined from 8.3 per cent in 2001-02 to 7.7 per cent in 2003-04. Despite this reduction, the overall unemployment rate in the last two years was higher than the unemployment observed during 1990-98. "The benefits of the recent economic growth are, therefore, not evenly distributed in terms of generating employment opportunities," the report adds.

These are not merely figures or statistics as they depict a human tragedy for many. In an era of globalisation and consumerism there are people who have not been able to find meaningful employment to support their families. After 60 years, we have not provided our people with the required skills and education to compete in the global labour market. Human resource development or organising the education system on scientific or contemporary lines has never been the priority with successive governments.

Our planners have focussed their attention on free market economy, macro-economic stabilisation, attracting foreign investment, privatisation and enhancing foreign exchange reserves. In the mad rush to achieve those targets they have perhaps forgotten that human resource development is the key to achieving the most important objectives.

The other very important reason for growing unemployment is the change in the priorities as a comprehensive alteration has taken place in the composition of our Gross Domestic Product (GDP). Earlier, agriculture sector was our mainstay with a minuscule share of the services sector in the overall economy. However, today the contribution of the services sector outweighs the combined share of agriculture and manufacturing. Statistics show that agriculture remains the largest employer as its share is still as high as 43 per cent in terms of jobs.

Therefore it is not surprising that more and more people continue to join the ranks of the unemployed despite the favourable macro-economic indicators over the last eight years as the government is not giving due attention to investment in this vital sector. This is one of the classic examples of mal-governance leading to erroneous economic priorities and practices.

All in all, there is a need to tackle the problem on a priority basis as it is now also eroding the social fabric of society. Unemployed youth are easy prey for criminals, drug dealers and extremist groups. Employers, too, should understand that without a serious commitment to employment generation and human development, economic growth is neither sustainable nor deliverable in a socially just manner.