

Youth entrepreneurship

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T am glad that youth entrepreneurship is put on the agenda. When there is little government, private or community efforts, then we resort to individual and group entrepreneurship, it seems. We hope that people themselves will use their imagination and ideas to do the best out of things – all alone. Well, with some help and publicity, too, sometimes at least. And the coming weekend that is the case.

On 25 and 26 July, the Global Entrepreneurship Summit (GES) 2015 will be held in Nairobi, Kenya. President Barack Obama will be the most prominent speaker. The organizers have held several similar conferences in other countries with development aid assistance from the American government aid agency USAID. The purpose of the summit is to share experiences and ideas and to give encouragement to young entrepreneurs worldwide, especially in developing countries, where there is abundance of talent and indeed great needs for development.

Young innovative minds and hands can change their own lives and their communities themselves. True, sometimes. But often, the poor young men and women need assistance; they need start-up capital from the public or private sector to realize ideas; they need practical training in organization and administration, marketing, pricing, bookkeeping and other fields. And often, they need to know how to keep competitors out of the way, or to be allowed to take marked shares from established companies, which may have been in near monopoly situations. It is naïve to believe that to be a good inventor and entrepreneur is the same as being a good businessperson. To start something new is rarely easy; it is not to go from rags to riches overnight. Mostly, it is hard work, with genuine help and support from parents, friends, colleagues, businesspeople, government, and others – and a good portion of luck and prayers may help, too.

In his famous speech in Cairo in 2009, President Obama elevated entrepreneurship to the forefront in the United States aid relationship and assistance. This year's summit is the sixth in a row and Obama who coined the term the 'new beginning' is the most honorable guest along with some 3000 speakers and participants from all over the world and various fields of business development; there will be leaders, mentors and high-level government officials, and hopefully a good number of the actual entrepreneurs.

Entrepreneurship is mainly a private-sector domain, or that is what we think, and that is perhaps also why it is advocated by USA, a country with such strong belief in the private sector, and less in the government sector. Yet, it is my opinion that the government must play an active role in developing policies, prioritizing plans, certifying training and apprenticeship, offering credits, and much more. The coordinating role is essential without which just talking about entrepreneurship becomes an excuse for the government. The government should ascertain leadership and broad participation of everyone, indeed the entrepreneurs and potential entrepreneurs themselves. They should also involve the labour unions, employers associations, private sector companies, retired leaders, vocational and academic training schools and universities, and so on.

In Kenya, where the Global Entrepreneurship Summit and Week is held this now, the government sees entrepreneurship as a key ingredient in the country's development towards realizing what is called 'Kenya Vision 2030'. Entrepreneurship is viewed as important for everyone, indeed for the youth, including the at-risk youth. Hence, when Nairobi recently held a Slum Fest, a National Innovation Challenge was launched with the purpose of unlocking youth innovation and creativity. Thus, from the top, there is support for young entrepreneurs. But

then comes the practical implementation of the good intentions so that it doesn't just remain lip-service and summit-speeches – great formulations by orators like President Obama and the other well-spoken men and women from his Luo ethnic group in Kenya. Yes, they are known for being intelligent and good speakers; they are lawyers, teachers, accountants and bureaucrats, but not always as good in practical work and business. In Kenya, it is the Kikuyu ethnic group that is seen as best in those fields.

I worked in Kenya for many years, and I got used to the hearing this generalization. However, I don't think it had much to do with genetics. It had to do with economic incentives and exposure. They Kikuyu lived around the dynamic capital Nairobi while the Luo lived in the country's smaller city of Kisumu, in the backwaters around Lake Victoria, neglected by consecutive governments and the private sector.

True, the Obama's and the Luo give good speeches! But that doesn't mean they cannot also be good doers. They have the added ability to formulate ideas and visions, analyze, explain and encourage others – and in doing things if the conducive environment for development is provided. It always ends up with that – in Kenya, Pakistan and everywhere else. And I believe that it is the federal, provincial and local governments that must create the framework, provide incentives and coordinate. They must involve everyone, certainly also the private sector. They government shouldn't try to do everything. But the government does have the responsibility to lead, coordinate and evaluate results.

In Kenya, when I worked there over twenty years ago, I was very impressed by something called K-Map, Kenya Management Assistance Programme. It was an assistance programme where retired government and private sector managers gave their time for free to help young and up-coming entrepreneurs in establishing their businesses. It was appreciated by the International Labour Organization (ILO) and was expanded to include other African countries, and was then called A-Map. In Pakistan, we need P-Map! We need many such organizations and groups, and some of them can have links with sister-organizations in other countries, including in Kenya, America, Europe, and elsewhere.

If we don't think Pakistan has anything to learn from an African country like Kenya, we are wrong. The entrepreneurial Kenyans, indeed the Nairobians, are moving fast on their way up. And the Pakistanis, with their great family business culture running through their veins, have much to teach Kenyans.

Kenyan middleclass women in the modern, urban sectors have much in common with their sisters in Pakistan – they are independent and do what they believe themselves. To be independent and have a good portion of stubbornness is part of being a good entrepreneur, and at the same time, one needs to listen and observe.

Middleclass Pakistani and Kenyan women – and men – are well-educated in the formal school system. That gives a good basis, but the willingness to experimentation and taking risks, come from having some money to invest without going bankrupt every time one fails; and there are rainy days, not only sunny days.

At the lower levels, there are few buffers, and failure may lead to disaster. It is here that it is so essential that the government and others provide credit systems and free advisory assistance. In Kenya, where almost every child goes to school today, the poorest youth would have fairly good general knowledge, including functional knowledge of the English language, which is important, in addition to the national language of Kiswahili. And in Pakistan, it is Urdu along with English.

I am optimist on behalf of the youth as far as their competence and spirit is concerned. I am more worried about the sedate and lax attitudes of many old men in leadership, and women, too. Many of whom don't really want change, and if there is change and progress, they want some profit out of it for themselves. I hope that in the coming years, Pakistan's leaders – especially the current government with priority given to the private sector – can take the right initiatives and develop policies, plans and incentives which the young entrepreneurs need.

It isn't enough just to talk – and write newspaper articles. Neither President Obama nor the undersigned know how to be entrepreneurs. What we know is that entrepreneurs are key to success for people, communities and countries. We all rely on the concrete actions of the governments, planners, private sector and the young entrepreneurs themselves.

The writer is a senior Norwegian social scientist with experience from university, diplomacy and development aid.