Youth as Assets for Development

Engagement through Service

BY CHARLOTTE MCDOWELL

At 1.7 billion, today's youth comprise the largest generation ever to enter the transition to adulthood. Yet limited access to employment, further education, and work opportunities generates disempowerment, an increased sense of fatalism, and disengagement for millions of young people. Despite recognition of the concept of youth as resources for development, most programs targeting youth tend to focus on services that remedy deficiencies in education, skills, and training. By recognizing the potential to harness existing assets and opportunities within young people to affect both individual growth and community development, youth service programs present an alternative that provides constructive, structured opportunities that benefit society as a whole.

By identifying and addressing local needs, youth engaged in service make important contributions to communities while reinforcing positive views of young men and women as assets rather than burdens to the collective wellbeing. Many of these programs meet local communities' needs for essential services, help youth make successful transitions into adulthood, and allow young people to utilize and strengthen their existing capacities as part of an engaged citizenry.

Since youth service is an approach to youth development and civic participation, programs are particularly flexible and adaptable to the local context and targeted youth population. The following sections highlight a few of the diverse areas where youth service programs are already having an impact on national needs and generating young leaders, but it is far from comprehensive.

Youth Star Cambodia volunteers work to reduce poverty and youth migration by advancing useful life skills and expanding local livelihood options in rural areas. One of the volunteers' activities is to promote food security by training young farmers to increase productivity through ecologically sustainable practices.
Strengthening democratic practices

FROM VOTING to engaging in political dialogue and understanding how political systems operate, each generation must have the required tools to properly shape and participate in civil society and government. Youth service programs are a collective activity focused on addressing community needs, and the best designed and implemented programs have also been successful at bringing young people together across social divides, fostering bonds of trust, and developing an ethic of working for the common good. The resulting social capital is the glue upon which a healthy democracy is based. As social capital theorist Robert Putnam claims, "all our societies need more social capital ... and in my view the single most promising area of initiative is youth service."5

Well designed youth service programs help to build relationships among civil society organizations, local government, and citizens, thereby creating an understanding of the foundations of democratic practices rooted in citizen rights and responsibilities. Service moves beyond theoretical civics education to hands-on local engagement, providing stronger understandings of civic participation. A recent study on the impact of service-learning on high school students in the United States found that participants in community-based learning activities are significantly more likely to intend to vote.6 Participation in service activities has also been documented to result in future volunteerism, thereby creating a generation of citizens who exercise their civic responsibilities.7

Case Study: Association OSMIJEH, Bosnia and Herzegovina8

While few youth service programs directly and exclusively work on "democratic development," there are many programs that work on key challenges facing countries transitioning to, or consolidating, their democracy. One example is the OSMIJEH (Smile) program, which is actively working to counteract the fact that over 95% of young people believe they have little or no influence on political events in their country.9 OSMIJEH service programs mobilize Muslim, Serb, and Croat young people to work side-by-side in reconstructing rural villages, tutoring in elementary schools, and caring for disabled children and the isolated elderly population. The interaction with all members of society fosters trust and helps to reconnect divided peoples while helping to overcome feelings of disengagement and helplessness to create empowered, participatory young citizens. To date, over 6,000 young people have participated in this work through OSMIJEH.

Increasing youth employability10

YOUNG PEOPLE in developing countries suffer from record unemployment rates. They need structured opportunities to apply their talents and abilities, while developing skills and habits that transfer to employability. In contrast to most job and skills training schemes, well designed and implemented youth service initiatives can form "an approach which tackles the multiple problems faced by disadvantaged youth in an integrated manner and may be more effective than individual employment focused programs."11 In this regard, youth gain more than just specific job skills or training, complementing human capital formation with social capital development as well as "soft skills" that are highly valued by employers: decision-making, responsibility, cooperation, and teamwork.

Youth service programs also overcome one of the major obstacles facing young people entering the labor market: their lack of work experience. Spending a full-time, structured period working on critical national issues allows youth to develop work experience in a range of areas, including the often excluded non-profit sector. By focusing on real work rather than training alone, participants' work simultaneously helps to address many of the underlying factors that contribute to youth unemployment, including HIV/AIDS, poor or non-existent infrastructure, and environmental degradation.

Case Study: Jovenes Constructores

Since its first project began in May 2004, Jovenes Constructores (which translates as "youth builders" and is related to YouthBuild in the US, South Africa, Serbia, and Canada) has engaged over 270 out-of-school or unemployed youth in structured service projects throughout Mexico. Young people spend between four and six months working on community based projects that range from reforestation to gardening and the construction or repair of historic buildings, public squares, and community centers. Each young participant receives practical on-the-job training from masters in several trades, including masonry, iron-work, electrical wiring, plumbing, tree-planting/gardening, and painting. In addition, participants join a Press, Community Relations, Security, or Recreation project planning commission. Commission duties require the use of computers, interpersonal communication skills, negotiation tactics, and decision-making. Finally, youth
work with staff members at the end of their service to make additional contacts, refine their resumes, and set up job interviews to bridge the transition from service to employment. At the end of this experience, over 75% of participants have found permanent employment or returned to their studies.

Promoting recovery in post-conflict settings

As young people who have been involved in traumatic conflict situations transition to more peaceful environments and from childhood to adulthood, they need opportunities to take on a positive identity, thereby preventing a “youth crisis” that blocks the transition to responsibility and adulthood. Providing positive alternatives for youth can also help prevent resurgent conflict by limiting young people’s social disaffection and disengagement.

Youth service provides an alternative that moves beyond the victim-perpetrator dichotomy. Generating structured opportunities for young people to become a part of peace-building efforts and take on positions of responsibility contributes not only to their reintegration and skills acquisition, but also provides community and nation re-building that is desperately needed in war-torn areas. Well designed service programs move beyond traditionally disconnected areas of demobilization, reintegration, education, and employment training to provide a holistic form of youth development. Service activities can also integrate the majority of youth who are excluded from demobilization, reintegration, and psychosocial counseling programs into programming that addresses personal and community development. When implemented correctly, organized systems of training and supervision allow for a protective environment for youth without reinforcing distinctions between genders and selective inclusion seen in targeted programs.

In the wake of conflict, the loss of facilities, materials and teachers provides a significant opening for young people who can provide services as peer educators on health issues or as mentors and tutors for younger children. Service programs also fill the education gap by providing opportunities for informal education, personal and social skills development, and vocational training. Engaging in peacebuilding and community re-development helps participants develop inter-personal skills, self-confidence, and a sense of affiliation and commitment to their society that is lacking in conflict settings. Furthermore, youth can help mend the social fabric of conflict-affected societies through working together in groups across ethnic, religious, or social divides.

Case Study: Jeunesse en Reconstruction du Monde en Destruction (JRMD), Burundi

Since the 1993 massacres between Hutu and Tutsi ethnic groups in which tens of thousands of Burundians were killed, the Youth in Reconstruction of the World in Destruction program has

Maximizing service program benefits

The effectiveness of youth service programs is contingent upon a variety of factors, including program design and implementation, community needs and contexts, and socio-political climates. Local and national stakeholders must devise strategies to avoid the following potential pitfalls: inadequate supervision for participants; adaptation of military service models with ensuing politicization; lack of sufficient mechanisms to prevent fractionalization along social divides; establishing program goals and parameters without sufficient stakeholder consultation; and failure to engage existing service and community organizations. In order to avoid these problems and to create highly effective programs, particular attention must be paid to proper design, training and supervision, continued revision and reassessment, and ensuring sufficient funding allocation.

The adaptability of service provides a powerful tool for generating integrated and holistic solutions to the challenges both youth and their communities face. With the largest generation of youth ever comes the largest opportunity yet to harness young people’s energy, idealism, and desire for participation and
inclusion. Experience demonstrates that young people in every part of the world are eager to participate in community-building activities if given the chance. What is missing is not their motivation or interest, but the investment in more high quality, structured opportunities through which they can make strides toward improving both their own lives and the world around them. The 2007 World Development Report has provided the impetus for governments around the world to develop such opportunities to engage youth in response to national needs. By building upon young people's willingness to serve, such efforts will help position youth as agents of national change.

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Endnotes
1 Portions of this section are drawn from "Youth Service: A Strategy for Youth and National Development," Youths Development Notes volume 1, number 2, December 2005, which was written by Innovations in Civic Participation for the World Bank's Children and Youth Unit.
2 Youth service is an organized period of substantial engagement and contribution to the local, national, or global community that is recognized and valued by society and provides minimal monetary compensation to the participant. Global Service Institute: http://gsww.wustl.edu/csd/sigp.
8 Available online at http://www.nsomihj.bai/about.htm
9 "Independent evaluation of the national youth policy in Bosnia-Herzegovina," Independent report by Youth Information Agency Bosnia-Herzegovina (OIA), Sarajevo, April 2005.
12 Available online at http://www.jovenesconstructores.org/
13 This section is drawn from Innovations in Civic Participation's forthcoming paper, "Youth Engaged in Service: A Visionary Strategy for Post-Conflict Recovery."
15 Available online at http://www.jrmd.org/

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programs can be addressed without losing the chance for the productive apparatus to grow and become more dynamic, which in the long run is the most sustainable solution to youth poverty problems.

2 Initiatives for supporting youth entrepreneurship should be based on comprehensive strategies, with strong levels of coordination between the different agencies and institutions affecting the enterprise creation process. Despite difficulties implementing comprehensive promotional models, mainly due to the high cost of building and connecting multiple strategic alliances, we believe that in the long run such an approach will produce the best results.

3 Education is a critical success factor in a business. It is important for programs to include training on subjects of entrepreneurship, but that is by no means sufficient. The public sector needs to help promote reforms in the education system to include these topics.

4 Initiatives for supporting youth entrepreneurship must have strong involvement by the private sector—and by civil society in general—if the intention is to change the conditions of the context, and hence it is crucial that actions be taken to achieve its commitment from the strategy design phase onward.

5 Finally, improvements in the business environment can be a powerful tool to help young entrepreneurs succeed. Despite improvements in recent years, much remains to be done to facilitate registration of microenterprises and all the steps and procedures and costs associated with their operation.

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This article is based on their paper "Is Youth Entrepreneurship a Necessity or an Opportunity?" (IDB 2007).

Endnotes
2 According to data from the Household Survey from 14 countries in the region that covers 80% of the regional population, in "Is Youth Entrepreneurship a Necessity or an Opportunity?" by Listerri, Kantis, Angelelli and Tejerina, IDB, 2006.
3 Id.
5 Global Entrepreneurship Monitor.
6 "Developing Entrepreneurship, Experience in Latin America and Worldwide." By Kantis, Angelelli, Mouri, IADB, 2005.
7 "Fomento de la actividad emprendedora en America Latina y el Caribe, Sugencias para la formulacion de proyectos" (Promoting entrepreneur activity in Latin America and the Caribbean; Suggestions for Project Design) Angelelli and Prats, IDB, 2005.