



# Youth Work

## Promoting Professional Recognition

According to the Commonwealth's 35-country baseline on the status of youth work as a profession in member states, only 12 countries (34 per cent) had taken significant steps to professionalise the youth work sector. Only 11 (31 per cent) countries had distinct national-level policies that recognised youth work as a distinct profession.

### Towards Professional Status for Youth Work

Youth work is defined at the Commonwealth Secretariat as 'all forms of rights-based youth engagement approaches that build personal awareness and support the social, political and economic empowerment of young people, delivered through non-formal learning within a matrix of care'.<sup>1</sup>

The Commonwealth initiated its commitments to the profession of youth work through its support for the implementation of the Commonwealth Diploma in Youth Development Work in the 1970s. The 2007 Commonwealth Youth Ministers Meeting (CYMM) committed to the Plan of Action for Youth Empowerment (PAYE), the framework which renewed and expanded this commitment to youth development work. The contributions of the Commonwealth to professionalising youth work has subsequently been endorsed by member states including at the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) 2013 and the Commonwealth Youth Ministers' Meeting 2017 where youth ministers agreed "to promote youth work as a profession through education and training for sectors where youth engagement is important." (CYMM Communiqué, 2017).

### The Role of Youth Work

Receiving quality youth work services from trained youth work professionals is the right of young people. Youth work is a relational profession built around the skills and competencies of engaging young people to enhance their self-esteem, social connectedness, productivity and employability, emotional and intellectual maturity, and autonomy. It supports young people's journeys of self-empowerment within caring and supportive environments.

Youth work benefits young people, but it also benefits institutions and society. When adequately funded and resourced, and when comprehensive training is provided to practitioners, youth work is shown to have greatly contributed to reducing youth-related demands on social services, enhancing public service efficiency, and, more broadly, promoting inter-generational equity and national development.

A study in the United Kingdom which assessed youth work projects with gangs, for example, found a success rate of more than 70 per cent (of these projects, as opposed to social work processes, or justice processes) 'in terms of diverting young people from criminal activity and reintegrating them with effective education and employment. No other intervention has been as effective'.<sup>2</sup> This is a distinct example that demonstrates to policy-makers the benefits of investing in youth work. We need to further build the case through quality research.

The upcoming *Transformative Youth Work International Conference: Developing and Communicating Impact*, 4-6 September 2018<sup>3</sup> explores evidence of the impact of youth work in selected European countries. This would possibly lead the way for similar impact assessments in the Commonwealth.

## The Policy Issue

It is commendable that youth development and youth empowerment are now accorded high priority in global, regional and national development agendas. There is also broad international consensus around young people's contributions to society and global development.<sup>4</sup> However, in spite of incremental policy advances, the critical mediators that support young people's self-empowerment – youth workers – are often invisible in these discussions and mandates.

Youth workers function in many shape and forms, in both governmental and non-governmental contexts, to support young people reach their own personal, social and political aspirations. Yet there is little recognition of this work as a distinct professional practice, requiring specific professional skills and institutional support for professional growth.

## The 35-country Youth Work Baseline

The Commonwealth has been promoting the establishment of youth work as a distinct profession through education and training for several decades. More recently, we have begun engaging governments and youth workers' associations on advancing the professionalism of youth work. *Youth Work in the Commonwealth: A Growth Profession*, the Commonwealth's 35-country<sup>5</sup> baseline<sup>6</sup> completed in 2017, is the latest example of this commitment.

Key criteria used in the baseline to assess professional status of youth work included

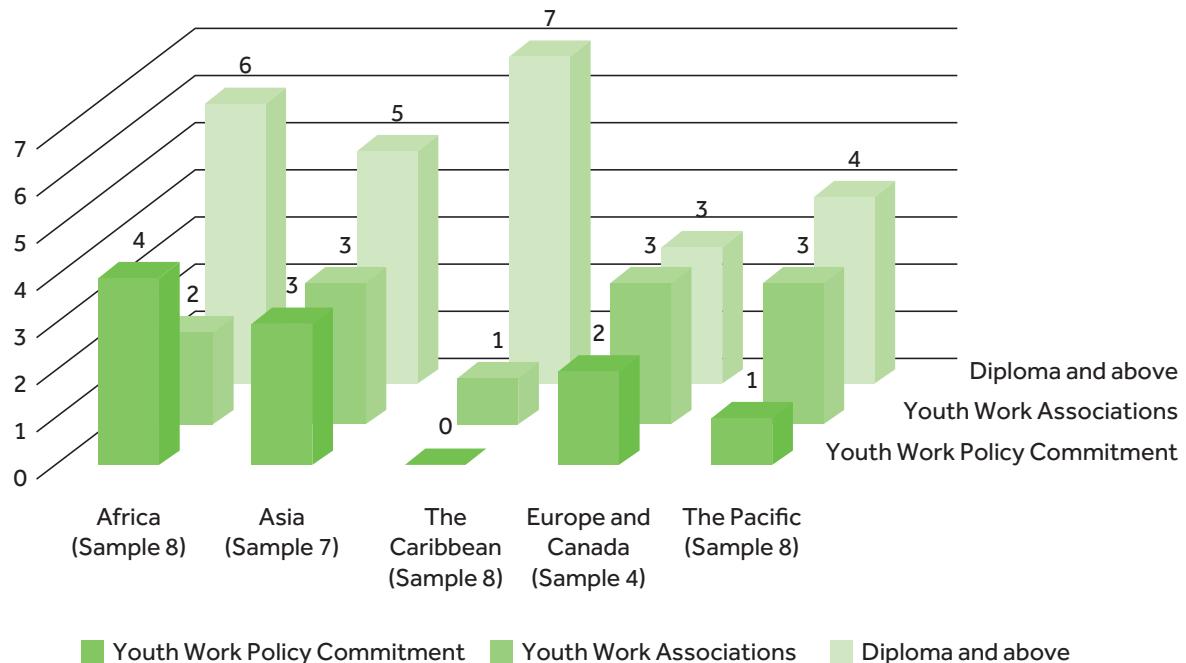
- a. A collectively formulated and understood definition of youth work
- b. Country-level legislation and policies that recognised youth work as a distinct profession
- c. Existence of national/regional professional associations that helped ensure the integrity and quality of the profession
- d. Existence of competency standards, ethical standards and other practice regulators
- e. Existence of clearly-defined qualifications pathways for youth workers from short courses to PhDs
- f. Professional validation of youth work education and training that ensured the relevance of education and training to youth workers' needs in the field
- g. Supervision of youth work practice that ensured accountable and responsible practitioners
- h. Adequate public investment in professionalising youth work, and youth work spaces, as well as adequate remuneration of youth workers

Out of the 35 countries in the sample, (the sample included countries that have achieved the greatest advances in the status of youth work), 12 countries (34 per cent) had taken significant steps<sup>7</sup> to professionalise the youth work sector. Only 11 (31 per cent) countries had distinct national-level policies that recognised youth work as a distinct profession. 12 countries (34 per cent) had youth workers' associations that help safeguard the integrity and quality of the profession, and 25 (71 per cent) could claim at least a diploma-level qualification for youth work professionals. This is considering the contributions of all youth sector players.<sup>8</sup> In Africa, Asia and the Caribbean, many of the advances have been directly and indirectly attributed to the Commonwealth's efforts.

There is somewhat of a correlation between policy commitment and actioned progress in education and training and the establishment of youth workers' associations, even though in some regions/countries, progress in developing commitments to professional practice has occurred despite a lack of supporting legislation and policy.

**Figure 1** demonstrates commitments identified in the survey for the five regions/regional groups of the baseline:

**Figure 1. Regional trends - commitments to professionalising youth work**



Findings indicated that it was not always State legislation or policy that drives dynamic youth work. Systematic, guided and supervised youth work was often supported by practice networks, youth workers' associations and education and training institutes. Moreover, commitments to youth work in policy did not always correlate with commensurate investment and implementation of policy, nor adequate remuneration of youth workers.

However, in countries such as Malta, youth work legislation and policies explicitly paved the way for greater investment in youth work, both for training and practice. The legislative backing for the profession in Malta is in fact broadly seen as the foundation of this cohesive education and training pathways for youth workers and youth work delivery mechanisms in the country. So, by extension, where effective youth work exists, a State's policy commitments can clearly spread and amplify the quality and impact of this good work.

## Key Tenets of Youth Work

The key tenets of youth work are based on the Commonwealth's *Professional Youth Work: A Concept and Strategies* that sets out the ethos of youth work that the Commonwealth advances and supports.

The concept note elaborates these as follows<sup>9</sup>:

- Professional care:** The delivery of youth work services in environments providing professional, detached care for young people. This is based on an associative, rather than personal, relationship with young people. Youth workers support young people in order that they might represent themselves better.
- Building personal awareness and expectation:** Building young people's personal awareness of their strengths and helping them deal with personal challenges, while building their expectation of themselves. This requires that youth workers are able to support young people to detect interest in/care about their wellbeing and that they might develop the motivation to have expectations of themselves.
- Social and political education:** Developing intellectual, personal and ethical means to interact, think critically, and develop in a social context. This can also be extended to mean the development of a collective consciousness among young people in order that they contribute to their advancement and the advancement of their communities, nations and the world. This requires both youth work practitioners, and young people

**Figure 2: Dividends of professional youth work to young people and society**



they work with, to develop the ability to take and manage responsibility, as well as deal with the consequences of action.

- d. **Making professional judgement:** The youth worker needs to be able to make sound, evidence-based and non-partial judgements based on practice experience around each and every context of their interaction with young people.
- e. **A rights-based approach:** Human rights principles and the Commonwealth Charter frame all aspects of youth work advanced by the Commonwealth, including recognising young people as agents in determining the best youth work initiatives for them and ensuring that young people's rights are the main priority at all times.
- f. **Youth participation:** Ensuring that youth work promotes young people's agency and they are enabled to participate in every aspect of decisions around youth work provision, and monitoring and evaluation of youth work outcomes.

Youth work has core practice principles, but it has needed to be fluid and adaptive because the young people it serves, and the social situation they find themselves in, are also continually changing. Youth work serves no one situation or young person. It has grown and transformed because of its inherent responsiveness; like the young people it serves, it is becoming more than what it is, looking to be all it might be. But also like young people, while youth work has commonalities in any given circumstance, it is necessarily shaped by local, cultural and social considerations. Youth work is a growth profession.

## The Dividends of a Professional Youth Work Cadre

**Figure 3** relates these professionalism criteria to a. their bearing on practice, b. benefits for young people, and finally c. for society.

Investing in young people is a moral and ethical prerogative. But it is also a strategic prerogative that helps nations work towards attaining development objectives by making young people empowered development partners who are also receiving the full social, political and economic benefits they are entitled to.

## Way Forward

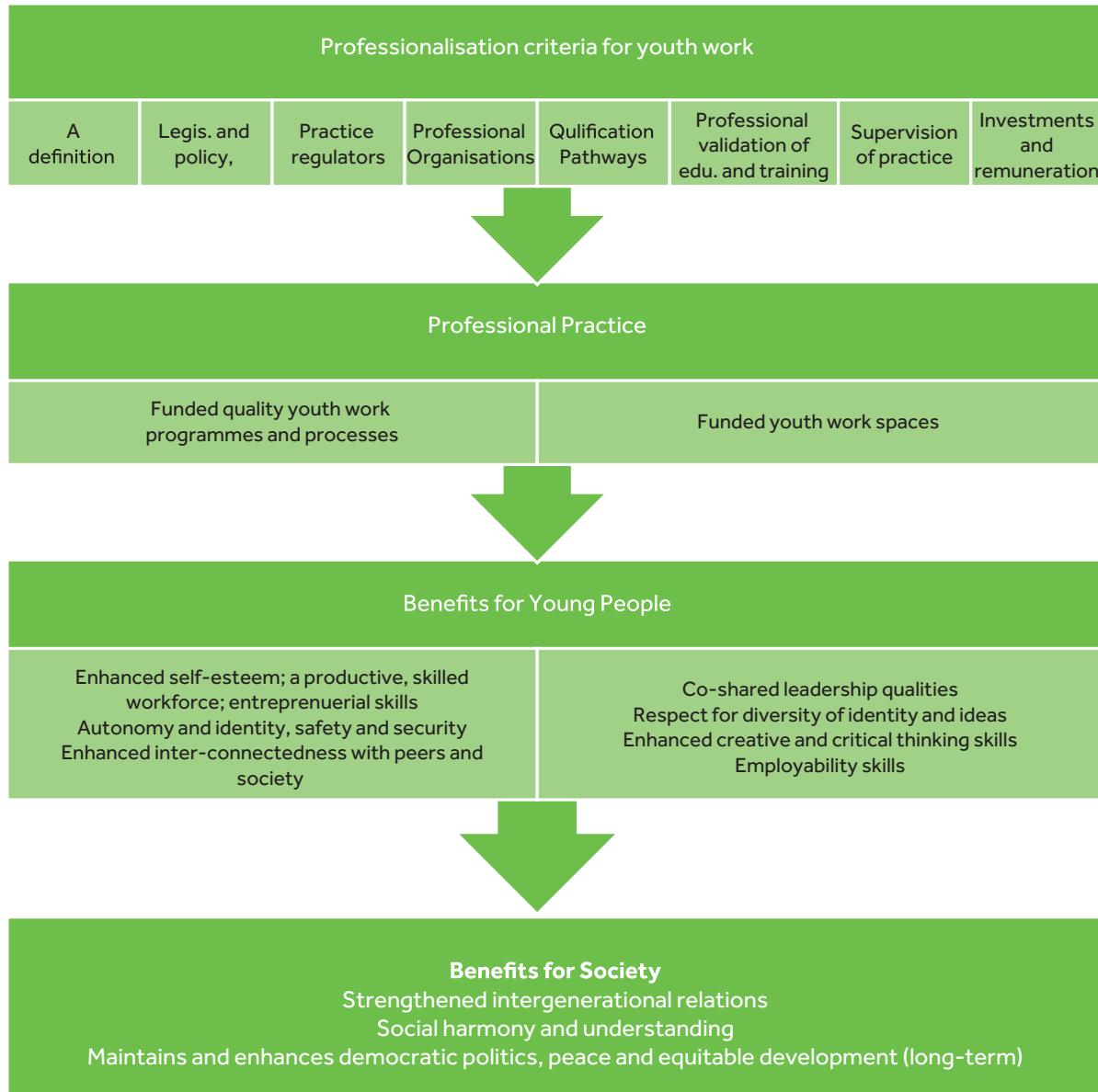
The findings of the Commonwealth's youth work baseline indicate the extent of effort required in order to establish youth work as a recognised professional practice across the Commonwealth. These supporting policy environments are critical to building a skilled and competent youth work cadre without whom the empowerment of young people will not be a reality.

Governments, youth workers, and young people will pay attention to:

### 1 Build a collaborative vision for youth work.

Build a national vision for professional youth work based on the foundations of a strong, competent cadre of youth workers with attitudes, knowledge and capabilities of professional judgement. Build this in collaboration with all youth work practitioners, those teaching youth work, with youth stakeholders, and especially with young people.

Figure 3: Dividends of professional youth work to young people and society



## 2 Formalise youth work education and training in qualifications frameworks

Ensure that youth work training and qualifications are registered onto the National Qualifications Authority Framework or by a relevant recognised qualifications authority to formalise education and training for youth work.

## 3 Obtain professional recognition for the youth work profession

Ensure that Public Service Commissions recognise youth work as a profession in the public sector. While many countries have assigned youth service officers/youth co-ordinators in public sector youth

structures, and many countries include functions related to youth work in the role and responsibilities of youth service officers, the formal recognition of the profession would obtain value and recognition for the profession, regularise competitive pay scales and, by extension, strengthen youth worker retention and systematic delivery of asset-based youth work for young people. An evidence-based policy paper that sets out the rationale and approach for the recognition of the youth work profession is usually a good start.

#### 4 Develop a framework for professionalism considering the eight criteria of the baseline and other relevant national/regional priorities, and implement the framework

Assess your country's/region's status in terms of the eight criteria for professional youth work set out above. Develop a widely consulted framework that brings on board the expertise and interests of all stakeholders highlighted in **recommendation 1**. Where a professional association exists, ensure their participation and leadership in the process as the core organisation of practitioners. In terms of government-led frameworks for professionalism, Malta and Malaysia provide an established and emerging professionalising process, respectively.

#### A proposed framework may want to consider the following:

##### 5 Set up structures and processes for youth work

The ultimate test of the ability to impact young people's lives through youth work practice will depend on the availability of comprehensive delivery structures (spaces, time, finances). Existing good practice in youth club processes and other youth work models would be helpful guides. An example is the Commonwealth-Pravah-NYKS pilot *Co-Creating Youth Spaces: A Practice-Based Guide for Youth Facilitators*.<sup>10</sup>

##### 6 Make youth work delivery accessible and safe

Youth work requires **proficient, trusted practitioners, who are ready and able to engage with young people and foster positive life outcomes**.<sup>11</sup> Ensure safety and vetting mechanisms for professionals working with young people so that young people will not be put at risk by allowing significant access to them by those who, both unintentionally and otherwise, might do harm to them.

##### 7 Ensure continuing education and competency-based programmes to raise practitioner abilities and status

Continuous professional development supports the retention of youth workers and enhances their capacity to respond appropriately to

young people.<sup>12</sup> While there is support for professionalising youth work by way of university-level education, others have concluded that experience-based training and preparation is the best way forward. Regardless of this lack of consensus about the means of professional development, it has been argued that youth work seems to be heading towards more formal professionalism.

The Commonwealth Youth Council has also asked for greater attention to be paid to the practice of peer youth work, where young people themselves attain professional status in order to engage other young people. In a context where research has highlighted the benefits of young professional peers engaging with others of their age group, this is indeed a further area of inquiry and strengthening through adequate education and training.

##### 8 Establish rights-based ethical standards

Developing and ensuring the implementation and monitoring of ethical standards for youth work practice in a participatory manner involving practitioners and young people. Ensure the participation of youth service beneficiaries in the monitoring and evaluation of services.

##### 9 Develop an evidence-base for youth work

Evidence is what tells us what works, and what does not. Examples of the impact of youth work on young people's lives, and on peace and prosperity of countries generally, also promotes trust in the profession, and encourages investment. Evidence also helps youth workers hone their craft. While the impact of youth work on development and equality is not always easy to measure, quantitative and qualitative modes of measuring achievement need to be explored and adapted.

##### 10 Develop a knowledge base for youth work

Knowledge creation in the youth work profession was not specifically addressed in this study. There is a significant body of intellectual work, both academic, and more practice-oriented, in the Commonwealth that needs to be collated, and shared. Examples of the more practice-oriented work include 'Ocean in a Drop: Inside

Youth Leadership', an examination of youth-led youth work and other initiatives in the context of India. Additionally, numerous youth work journals, including the *Commonwealth Journal of Youth Development Work*, periodically published jointly with the University of South Africa (UNISA), and the *Journal of Youth Work Ethics* published by Ara Taiohi in New Zealand add to the body of knowledge and deliberation around youth work. Such initiatives need to be improved and expanded.

### 11 Discuss and formulate competency frameworks for youth work as relevant to your context

With the professionalisation of youth work comes the need for standards with which to measure it. As indicated above, youth work lacks baseline tools for measuring professionalism, comparable to those found (for example) in medicine (American Board of Internal Medicine Committees on Evaluation of Clinical Competence and Clinical Competence and Communication Programmes, 2001 see <http://www.tau.ac.il/medicine/cme/pituach/030210/1.pdf>).

**The Caribbean Commonwealth competency standards and the UK's occupational standards** may be guides to forms of assessing professionalism. At a more granular level of assessing direct youth engagement competencies - **ComMutiny - Youth Collective's Challenger Deep assessment tool** - would also be a helpful guide.

### 12 Monitor and evaluate youth work

This involves ensuring mechanisms that enable youth workers and managers to monitor and evaluate the processes and results of youth work. This evidence helps accountability to young people and decision-makers, including in convincing planners and investors of the dividends of investing in youth work.

### 13 Invest in youth work and develop budget lines specific to expenditure relevant to professionalising youth work

Youth work needs investment. Public spending considerations for youth work are vital and the evidenced erosion of this investment in youth work needs to be curbed. At the same time, well-executed plans for funding strategies ranging

from equitable and rights-based public-private partnerships, entrepreneurial innovation, bilateral and multilateral partnerships, crowd funding and so on, need to be encouraged.

In the public sector, clear budget lines need to be set up in ministries and departments for youth work-related expenditure, including budget allocated for the education and training of youth workers, for investment in youth work programmes and processes, for the establishment of youth-work delivering youth clubs, and so on.

### 14 Focus on quality recruitment

Invest in, and liaise with, professional associations of youth workers to ensure the recruitment of suitable youth work professionals whose qualifications and youth engagement competencies, are adequately assessed. Youth workers, to be professional, need specific skills and knowledge. They therefore also need to be judiciously selected.

### 15 Establish and implement supervision frameworks

Explore collaborations with professional associations and universities demonstrating good practice as elaborated in Youth Work in the Commonwealth<sup>13</sup>, for setting up supervision standards so that youth workers might preserve and deepen their trained skill.

Young people are the greatest resource that youth work has (indeed without them there would be no youth work) and it is their collaboration that is the means to make youth work accessible, safe, fun and a means to promote and stimulate learning, and in turn cohesive, prosperous, societies.

Youth work is a growth profession, in a growth sector.

For more information, please visit the Commonwealth's 35-country baseline containing quantitative and qualitative data, including comprehensive country case studies, on progress Commonwealth member states have made in advancing youth work as a distinct profession. It is available online at [http://thecommonwealth.org/sites/default/files/events/documents/YouthWorkintheCW\\_9781849291736.pdf](http://thecommonwealth.org/sites/default/files/events/documents/YouthWorkintheCW_9781849291736.pdf). A hard copy can be obtained by writing to [youth@commonwealth.int](mailto:youth@commonwealth.int).

## Endnotes

1. Commonwealth Secretariat (2017). Youth Work in the Commonwealth: A Growth Profession. (London) p1
2. Pitts, J. (2007) quoted in Dough Nicholls, For Youth Workers and Youth Work (Bristol: The Policy Press. 2012), p186.
3. <https://www.marjon.ac.uk/courses/our-faculties/faculty-of-education--social-sciences/department-of-social-sciences/transformative-youth-work-2018--developing-and-communicating-impact-/>
4. Office of the Secretary General's Envoy on Youth (2016), 'How Leaders Brought Youth to the 71st United Nations General Assembly', United Nations, New York, available at: <http://www.un.org/youthenvoy/2016/10/world-leaders-brought-youth-71st-un-general-assembly/>
5. The countries in the study were: **Africa**: Ghana, Kenya, Malawi, Nigeria, South Africa, Uganda, Tanzania, Zambia; **Asia**: Bangladesh, India, Maldives, India, Pakistan, Singapore, Sri Lanka; **The Caribbean**: Barbados, Belize, Dominica, Guyana, Jamaica, St Lucia, St Vincent, Trinidad and Tobago; **Europe** and Americas: Canada, Cyprus, Malta, United Kingdom, **The Pacific**: Australia, Fiji, New Zealand, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga, Vanuatu.
6. See end of document for access information.
7. For the purposes of this study, 'significant steps' were identified as: policy commitments to youth work, existence of professional associations for youth work, and the availability of at least a diploma-level qualification for youth work.
8. The youth sector comprises all players who have youth empowerment/development as a major strategic area of intervention and can include ministries and departments, university departments, professional associations, networks and so on.
9. These key tenets reflect, and elaborate/expand on the key criteria for professional youth work set out in the Commonwealth document Professional Youth Work: A Concept and Strategies (Commonwealth Youth Programme, Asia Centre, 2012).
10. Commonwealth Secretariat, Nehru Yuva Kendra Sangathan (India), Pravah (India), 2014.
11. Astroth, K., P. Garza and B. Taylor. (2004), 'Getting down to business: Defining competencies for entry-level youth workers', New Directions for Youth Development, Vol. 104, pp. 25–37
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13. <https://books.thecommonwealth.org/youth-work-commonwealth-paperback>



The Commonwealth

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