
THE NEED FOR A NATIONAL YOUTH POLICY

A policy is an intentional course of action. Governments use policies in allocating resources to competing demands within society. In the absence of political will by governments there will be no National Youth Policy. In our view, there are compelling reasons why Commonwealth countries should adopt National Youth Policies.

- The present day situation of youth requires it.
- National development objectives requires it.
- The needs and aspirations of youth cannot legitimately be ignored.

Table I shows the age distribution and demographic significance of youth in some randomly selected Commonwealth countries. The pattern in Asian countries is very much the same.

T A B L E I

Age distribution and demographic significance
of youth*

Country	Year	0-14	15-29	30-59
Nigeria	1963	41.3	31.8	21.7
Kenya	1969	48.3	25.1	21.2
Seychelles	1960	38.8	23.1	29.1
Zambia	1969	45.8	23.8	25.9
Ghana	1970	46.8	24.5	23.3
Mauritius	1976	56.9	30.9	10.3

* Source: UN Year Book April 1975

Bi-annual digest of statistics - Mauritius June 1977

In more than 30 Commonwealth countries, young people under the age of 30 constitute more than 50% of the population. To ignore half the population by doing without a National Youth Policy is to fail to grasp the significance of the contribution of youth in a rapidly changing society.

Because of their numerical superiority, young people necessarily play an important role in nation-building. They constitute in excess of 60% of the economically active population of the Commonwealth.

Governments should view youth as a valuable asset in the national development process; some governments, such as Malaysia which has a National Youth Policy, have specifically recognized this. Even if national development is viewed in a narrow economic sense of harnessing human and material resources to increase the production of the nation's goods and services, youth is a source of comparatively mobile manpower and a dynamic force for change.

Through a National Youth Policy governments can effectively link young people into the national development process. Arnold Smith, speaking in 1974 as Commonwealth Secretary-General, had this to say about youth :

"We must realize that in fact a lot have not dropped out, they have been pushed out or worse still they have never been able to get in ..."

Given scope, youth will be more innovative, idealistic and creative than the older generation. In many developing countries, manpower is the most important and precious resource. Its judicious and planned use can determine the pace and character of development.

It is realistic and in governments' own interests to develop National Youth Policies which are integrated with National Development Policies. Given the numerical superiority of youth in either or both the workforce and population, a government which accepts high levels of non-productiveness among youth has to that extent impaired its own development efforts nationally and internationally. A National Youth Policy which develops the talents and potentials of youth in a conscious manner is vital to the national interest.

Table 2 shows some of the common denominators present in the developing Commonwealth countries:

- Where more than 60% of the economically active group are concentrated in the rural sector.
- Where the density per kilometre is not a problem and plenty of resources are available.
- But the GNP per capita and the literacy rate remain low.

Many of the Commonwealth countries represented here share some of the following :

- Mass poverty, which is chronic and not due to some temporary misfortune.
- Obsolete modes of production and social organization which means that poverty is not the result of poor natural, human or economic resources.
- An occupational structure where at least 50-55% of the gainfully employed population are engaged in agriculture, forestry and fishing.

The sad reality is that poverty with its disastrous consequences is not due to lack of resources but results from inappropriate and restrictive modes of development, social organization, and the prevailing pattern of international trading and financial arrangements which discriminate against developing countries.

In an Appendix, we have discussed the importance of bringing about a New International Economic Order (NIEO) and the constraints to development of present arrangements.

As Herr Elbrard Ebbler, Economic Minister for the German Democratic Republic, said in 1970, development work involving young people for nation-building is a political task. It is up to governments to ensure that young people understand the reasons for the backward condition of their environment. They should be made aware of the political, social, cultural and economic consequences of participation in nationally structured schemes.

Through a National Youth Policy, young people should be able to see the effectiveness of their talents and abilities within their countries. They should also be able to appreciate their contribution in an international context. Unless government brings about a situation where it gives full recognition to youth, and youth see themselves as an integral part of society, there is likely to be an opting out by youth.

The option for governments is not "to do something for the youth" but rather "to work with the young". Young people will continue to express their bitterness and frustration if governments continue to ignore the role they can play and avoid initiating policy decisions to counteract this wastage of manpower. We hope that governments recognize this before they also have to deal with youth apathy.

Indeed, precisely because democratic governments are accountable to their citizens, we believe governments can no longer ignore the needs and aspirations of half their populations. We recognize that young people's needs are as

T A B L E 2

Country	Population density per km	Population (million)	% urbanisation	% Labour in Agriculture	GNP US\$	Literacy %	Resources
Uganda	44	10,462	10	86	150	20	Manganese, Fish, Copper
Bangladesh	520	75,500	10	75	70	22	Fish, Natural Gas, Coal, Peat
Sri Lanka	199	13,033	23	49	110	76	50% Forest, Graphite, Gem Stones
Western Samoa	52	148	NA	NA	150	NA	Fish
Ghana	38	9,097	33	55	300	25	10% Forest, Fish, Gold, Diamonds, Manganese
Kenya	21	12,067	11	80	170	20-25	Wood, Fish
Sierra Leone	37	2,627	14	73	190	10	Fish, Diamonds, Iron ore, Bauxite

Source: UNESCO Statistical Year Book 1973

Economic Growth Trend, Near East and South Asia, Aid 74

World Bank Atlas 1974

diverse as those of the older generation; governments need to be aware of this diversity. They should develop suitable means for listening to what young people have to say.

Aspirations and needs voiced by young people are of two dimensions: *

The aspirations of youth themselves encompass such notions as independence, search for identity and conviction, equality of status with others, responsibility, social justice and liberty.

Youth aspirations for national development include equal opportunity for all, recognition as integral members of the society, participation in planning, relevant education, and equitable distribution of wealth.

In Commonwealth countries, government authorities and non-government agencies are engaged in youth work. The saddening feature is that they are, in most cases, operating in a "no policy" vacuum. A National Youth Policy would ensure first that they articulate to government what young people are saying, and secondly that there is no wastage, duplication or overlapping leading to squandering of precious material and human resources.

The existence of a National Youth Policy makes it easier to co-ordinate the resources and funds invested in young people at all levels and by various Ministries and voluntary organizations.

A policy is not a straight-jacket and as youth workers we would expect that a National Youth Policy would take into account the following variables :

- regional diversity within each country
- the diversity of the youth population
- the necessary level of autonomy for youth workers who are interacting with young people

We cannot stress enough the importance of a National Youth Policy incorporating sufficient avenues for feedback and suggestions from youth workers and young people themselves. A comprehensive National Youth Policy should give scope for self-expression by young people in line with national goals.

We hope that the reasons advanced and the pressing nature of the problems of our societies and economies will help convince governments of the wisdom of having a National Youth Policy.

* Source: adopted from: Report of the Regional Training Workshop for Youth Workers and Leaders in National Volunteer Service Programmes, ESCAP, 1974, V.10

The message is clear. It stresses for governments to come up with a coherent National Youth Policy. Recognition should be given to the fact taht the time is ripe, indeed it has long been overdue for the formulation of National Youth Policies.