
EVOLVING A NATIONAL YOUTH POLICY

A National Youth Policy can be formulated only if the National Government wishes to develop such a policy. Although this policy should incorporate the efforts and activities of the non-government sector as well as the government sector, it requires the political commitment of the National Government if it is ever to see the light of day.

National governments committed to introducing a national youth policy have a number of options open to them by which a policy can be formulated. What is interesting is the convergence around a broad consultation approach, even by military governments.

When the ruling Military Junta in Ghana decided to streamline the activities of youth in the country, it appointed a committee of experts and distinguished personalities knowledgeable in youth work from the public. The committee sat for six months touring regional and district capitals to receive submissions from the Youth organisations and the general public. Running concurrently with the work of the committee were discussions in the national daily newspapers, television and radio. The committee submitted its report to the Military Junta which passed a decree establishing the National Youth Council, based on the committee's submissions.

Establishment of an all-party parliamentary sub-committee is on the other end of the continuum from policy formulation by decree. This sort of approach clearly roots the policy formulating process in the parliamentary arena, and to the extent the parties can agree, the ultimate policy is made that much more secure because of bipartisan support. Moreover, a policy hammered out in such a forum is likely to come to grips with political realities, and is less likely to be subjected to criticism on this basis. However, Governments are required through this process to relinquish some of their power, and leave their own achievements open to scrutiny and comment.

It is the specialist working group which will be explored more fully in this paper since it is felt to be the approach most likely to be adopted by the majority of Commonwealth countries. It is also the approach we recommend and we suggest the following procedures.

Having decided to develop a National Youth Policy, government should establish a representative working group whose terms of reference should require it to produce a draft report on the scope of a national youth policy with suggestions for programmes through which the policy might be implemented. The terms of reference should also clearly spell out the government's proposed process for formulating policy so that there is no doubt as to where and when consultation starts and finishes.

The working group should be composed of both government and non-government personnel. On the government side it should include representatives of relevant government departments at national level; if the country's administration is decentralised, state and provincial/local government levels should be represented, in order to include all levels in the formulation stage, since all levels will be involved in the tasks of policy implementation. Representatives of non-government youth organisations and of professional organisations involved with young people - educationalists, social workers, youth workers, youth-work trainers, and technical experts in the field of vocation and employment - should also be represented.

In arriving at the composition of the working group the government should balance considerations of effective operation with the credibility of the report which the working group is required to produce. The task is not made any easier by an awakening consciousness of the needs of women, ethnic and religious minorities, and the disabled. To assist the working group maximum use should be made of co-optation for advice on specific issues.

The working group should be required to invite opinions and suggestions at all stages of its considerations, not only through extensive use of the mass media to contact the public but also through direct approaches to significant and appropriate interest groups including youth organisations.

A deadline should be set for the completion of a draft report, comprising the views of the working party in the light of any opinions received from the public during this planning stage.

This draft report should then be published by the government and circulated to all known national and state level youth organisations, to all government departments, and to libraries, schools, colleges and universities. Copies of the report should be available to all interested organisations and individuals, and reports of its publication, availability, and the desire for public comment by a given deadline should be carried in all mass media. Opinion poll surveys, forums, and other research devices should be used in an attempt to acquire the views of non-organised youth.

The Government should consider making ancillary staff and finance available to those individuals and organisations who may wish to comment upon the draft report but are hampered by financial and other resource constraints. We stress the importance of government investing resources of staff and money in this consultation process. Too often, for example, the Government seeks the views of youth organisations who, because of their on-going programme commitments, do not have an opportunity to express their views adequately. It is also particularly important that the government invest resources in the less developed regions of the country, and seek out the views of young people whose voices tend not to be heard in the clamour of the organised, clubbed youth groups.

Information received as a result of the consultation process should be analysed by the working group - and incorporated wherever the working group finds it appropriate.

A final report with recommendations to the Government should then be prepared, and published for a final, briefer period of public comment, again by a specified deadline. The report could be viewed as a White Paper, to which changes, if needed, could be incorporated. The amended final report and recommendations would be submitted to the Government for consideration and incorporation in its formal decision-making process.

The measures we have outlined should be capable of completion within a twelve month period. If necessary, a country could call on other countries or international agencies for advice and assistance. We acknowledge the role of the Commonwealth Secretariat in the Seychelles in February 1978 for example and we would encourage the Commonwealth Youth Programme to strengthen its policy advisory role. We are aware, too, that the Government of Sri Lanka, for example, studied a range of other countries' youth services, and made use of a respected international consultant before deciding on the structure of its national youth service. The consultation process we have recommended, combined with a representative, expert working group or panel, appears to us to meet the criteria of efficiency, credibility, comprehensiveness and sensitivity to diversity that should characterise the process of formulating a national youth policy.