



## 2 MISTAKEN ASSUMPTIONS ABOUT YOUNG PEOPLE AND THE SOCIETIES THEY LIVE IN

In our everyday lives we continually make assumptions about other people and how they will behave. The making of assumptions is not, in itself, necessarily undesirable - indeed if we didn't make them social life would grind to a halt. Imagine the problems if we could not safely and reasonably assume that the other driver will drive in the same direction and on the same side of the road as we are doing! In this sense, assumptions are a way of reducing uncertainty.

For our present purposes, though, it may be necessary, as a part of the learning process, to step back into uncertainty. This involves identifying some commonly made assumptions which, in reality, cannot safely and reasonably be made. Such assumptions can distort our view of the position of young people and result in serious weaknesses in any final policy that is developed.

In many ways this is a challenging task, for the most compelling assumptions are either those we do not know we are making, or those which we make because it serves our particular purposes. This should serve as a cautionary note about the close links between interests, assumptions and power.

### WHITE AND MALE - ALL YOUNG PEOPLE ARE THE SAME

There are four major assumptions made about young people, either implicitly or explicitly, that need to be challenged.

The first is that young people are male. In the English language this assumption is virtually embedded in the use of language itself - for example, the very word 'youth' conjures up images of young males; we never speak of female youth. In understanding the position of young people it is vitally important to recognise the way in which gender creates and forms life experiences and opportunities. The failure to recognise gender not only means ignoring half the population, but it also means that the view developed of the other, male, half is biased and distorted.

The second assumption is that young people are white. Whilst warnings about this assumption may be more appropriate for the western nations, it does have a wider application. For it links to the further assumptions that what is provided for white young people is necessarily right for all, or that it is only the white population which is important. Assumptions about race are as fundamentally distorting as those about gender.

The third assumption is that young people are defined solely by chronological age. Youth, it was argued earlier, is primarily culturally defined. Young people of the same chronological age in different societies may be at quite different points in their movement towards adulthood. A fourteen year old in the West is just over half way through secondary schooling; in other societies 14 year olds may be working full-time and shouldering heavy burdens of family responsibility.

The fourth and final assumption is that young people are homogeneous in their characteristics. Young people are divided by the same characteristics as divide their parents - such as class, gender and race. The fourteen year old daughter of a doctor has probably more in common with her father than with the fourteen year old daughter of a subsistence farmer. In this sense, young people reflect the divisions of the wider society, although sometimes in a modified form.

## WESTERN VALUES AND IDEAS - THE GOAL OF DEVELOPMENT

It is not only assumptions about young people which must be questioned, for we also make unwarranted assumptions about societies. Three major ones have been identified below.

First, it cannot be assumed that all societies are like Western Europe or the United States in terms of their social structures, political institutions and processes, or values. Nor can it be assumed that they should be, or that the Western ways are necessarily better. They may or may not be - but that is a matter for investigation rather than assumption.

Similarly, it cannot be assumed that all societies are heading towards a future which can be seen in Western Europe or the United States. Even where common global forces are at work, the

trajectories of change being experienced within societies owe much to indigenous traditions and to the influence of national histories. Societies are, and will remain, distinctively different from one another except at the relatively superficial levels of the bottle of Coke and denim jeans.

Third, Western concepts of youth cannot be assumed to apply elsewhere. The position of young people is not globally defined by Western nations. It also follows from this that there are grave dangers in simply importing provision for young people from another society or another culture. What is right for the young people of Canada may be quite wrong for the youth of Britain, let alone Papua New Guinea.

This difference in the concept of youth highlights a further difficulty in using the approach set out in this paper. This concerns the extent to which our languages and concepts can cross cultural boundaries and still make sense. Do the concepts of work, or employment or the family mean the same thing to people from different nations and cultures - do they mean anything at all?

There is no easy solution to this difficulty. Meanings are in people, not in words, and it demands time, understanding and interpretation to ensure that we are unravelling the meaning of concepts for the people concerned.

With an awareness of these assumptions and wider difficulties in mind it is now possible to move on to the next stage of the process. This involves understanding the importance of the international dimension in determining the national position of young people.