

Chapter 6

The Role of the Youth Sector

This chapter helps us discuss:

- the role of the youth sector as advocates for, and technical experts in, youth mainstreaming
- the youth sector as a consolidation of different players with different kinds of youth expertise
- different analytical lenses that help us evaluate the youth sector in our contexts
- the specific youth empowerment paradigms the youth sector helps integrate into youth mainstreaming.

6.1 What is the youth sector?

The youth sector comprises the multiple players that focus on youth equality and empowerment as their main institutional focus. The sector's role is central to rationalising and providing technical support for youth mainstreaming. The more the sector forms a unified and collaborative identity among all players within the sector, and articulates a co-ordinated vision and strategy among its players, the stronger its influence on other sectors. A youth sector in a member country may comprise players such as those set out in Box 6.1.

6.2 Engaging with national development planning

For the youth sector to successfully mainstream youth:

- the above players need to be well-co-ordinated and should play a critical role in influencing national development agendas and frameworks; and
- the sector should drive the need for a youth lens in every aspect of national planning, including assessing the perceived and real impact of policies and programmes on young people.

A considerable number of Commonwealth member countries have some, but not all, of the entities listed in Box 6.1 generally

Box 6.1 Players in the Youth Sector

Government ministry/department for youth at the national and local levels

Generally, the state policy arm for youth.

Government youth service implementing bodies

These implement youth ministry/department policies for youth services and other related matters, including collaboration with other sectors.

Youth-led organisations

Often independent and sometimes served by umbrella bodies, youth-led organisations deliver youth programmes and advocacy driven strongly by youth interests.

Youth movements, including students' unions

These differ from youth-led organisations in being relatively more independent of institutional affiliations and more informal in structure. In education contexts, such bodies could be student unions. They often tend to be issue-focused.

Youth-serving non-governmental and voluntary bodies

These deliver youth programmes.

Youth studies and youth-work studies delivery departments in universities, colleges and training bodies

These deliver training and education for youth empowerment and youth work.

Youth research institutes

Such bodies may co-ordinate with the youth ministry and other youth sector bodies for research relating to youth development and empowerment.

Youth workers' associations and other professional bodies in the youth sector

These are the guardians of quality and integrity in the youth sector, including youth work. They often regulate youth work practice and youth sector management.

making up the youth sector; these are at different stages of evolution. Often, the central nodal point is the youth ministry or a government youth department.

Engaging with national planning processes and ensuring policy alignment require advocacy and technical inputs to youth mainstreaming:

- **advocacy inputs** may include obtaining political will for YM, and gathering evidence of the financial and efficiency benefits of existing youth mainstreaming initiatives to demonstrate the viability of youth mainstreaming on a broader scale; while

- **technical inputs** would include the provision of youth empowerment knowledge and training to all sectors, including youth mainstreaming in sector planning and supporting sectoral assessment of youth-specific dimensions.

6.3 Youth sector preparedness for influence

It has often been noted how the youth sector tends to be ‘squeezed out’ in dialogue and deliberation around broad development issues. Players in the youth sector have observed how ‘youth’ as a distinctive cohort, and youth development as a concept, are ‘often subordinated to other agendas *unless* it was in relation to specific problems such as drop-out from education, unemployment, substance misuse or crime,’¹ with many seeing young people through a deficit lens. Overcoming these challenges and promoting asset-based approaches to engaging with youth, and youth issues, will require several considerations.²

6.3.1 What importance does the youth sector have in national development structures?

What level of importance is provided for the sector in national structures? Youth rarely has a ministry or entity of its own, and is more often coupled with sports or skills development. This sometimes, not always, leads to the undermining of the core priorities of youth development work, as articulated in Table 6.1. In other cases, the sector has been put at the very helm of national planning under the stewardship of the Head of Government – where there is either the advantage of receiving strategic and resource priority or the disadvantage of becoming somewhat side lined owing to the multiple priorities of the Head of Government.

Increasingly, in conditions where care economies are underfunded, the youth sector has disappeared from national structures into provincial governance, which again precludes strongly articulated national visions for youth. While the devolution of this authority can result in the design of more relevant and responsive local-level policies, there is nonetheless the danger of an absence of a national direction and vision, causing the watering down of a strongly articulated youth policy and programming.

6.3.2 How strong is the youth sector's leadership?

Leadership is at the core of how an institution is handled, wherever it is located. Does the leadership of the sector have a clear, participatory vision for young people? Does it have the political will to lobby for funds and strengthen human capacity to deliver for youth across sectors?

6.3.3 Is the youth sector's mandate clear and accountable to all?

Does the sector have a clearly articulated vision, mission and policies, particularly in the form of a youth policy that links to and supports youth mainstreaming across sectors? Is the policy implemented, and monitored and evaluated adequately? Are these mandates accountable to all youth groups, including the most marginalised such as young women, poor youth and youth facing discrimination due to caste, sexual orientation, disability or other factors?

6.3.4 How strong and clear are the youth sector's policy positions?

How strong are the sector's policy positions on youth? Are officials able to articulate the sector's position on young people's empowerment, participation, access to health and education, full employment etc. and represent the vision of the institution? Do they have the capacity to intervene in all aspects of policy-making with clear, evidence-based policy articulations that influence its vision, design and implementation for young people in other sectors?

6.3.5 Does the sector support youth participation structures?

Does the nodal body of the sector support structures and processes that mainstream young people in decision-making, such as putting in place national youth councils (NYCs) and youth parliaments, including ensuring their participation in decision making at all levels? How effective are they? Is their independence assured? Is the sector seeking ways to improve these structures?

6.3.6 How well is the government youth sector linked to all youth networks and civil society groups?

Other than its own youth participation structures, is the nodal decision-making body systemically linked to youth networks and civil society groups that represent the legitimate concerns and rights of young people? Is the sector adequately aware that there may be youth interest groups that are not necessarily represented in state-supported youth councils and youth parliaments? Are there effective connections with these alternative voices? Are all genders, races, social and economic classes, and caste groups represented in youth networks? Is there respect for diversity and difference?

6.3.7 How strong is the youth sector's commitment to youth rights?

Is there political commitment to the rights of young people? Is adequate political will generated for meaningful youth empowerment? Is there adequate funding and lobbying for youth budgets in other sectors?

6.4 Functions of the youth sector

The following are some functions of the youth sector that will help put youth development practice at the centre of youth mainstreaming.

1. Establishing a visible youth agenda

An explicit youth agenda, particularly through youth policies co-created with young people, is critical to affirm the youth sector's legitimacy. Youth policies can be an effective indicator of how successful partnerships and collaboration with other sectors have been in developing a truly youth-mainstreamed strategy within the youth sector, as well as how integrated youth mainstreaming is in national development planning, and will in fact work to strengthen youth mainstreaming in all sectors. The youth policy agenda, if disseminated in reader-friendly formats to young people and stakeholders, also

allows a shared vision and purpose for youth empowerment. It is important that the youth agenda be monitored.

2. Linking with civil society groups that support lobbying processes

Special efforts should be made to link civil society groups to government planning processes in their diversity, as indicated in Chapter 8. This requires going beyond government-led youth groups to integrate youth social movements and unaffiliated youth (see Figures 7.2 and 8.1).

3. Linking to local government stakeholders

Ensure bottom-up processes for decision making with local government, as well as top-down processes for information dissemination and consultation.

4. Ensuring youth services training for officials

Invest resources in the training of youth sector officials in youth development work; offer financial and non-financial increments for qualifications; and offer youth development capacity building to all sectors.

5. Developing new initiatives and methodologies to ensure youth mainstreaming in government policy-making processes

Develop nationally relevant youth mainstreaming policies and strategies to initiate dialogue with all development sectors.

6. Reviewing proposed legislation, policy and programmes in all appropriate areas to assess the potential impact on young people

Ideally carried out through the research and policy units of youth ministries/departments or in strong collaboration with research units of other sectors, youth mainstreaming requires a constant eye on emerging policies and programmes in other sectors. Officials should have the capacity to assess the potential and real impact of these policies on young people, in consultation with organised youth groups and other civil society groups.

7. Advocating for the disaggregation of quantitative data for young people within census boards and all sectors planning for young people

The youth sector plays a critical role in working with census departments or equivalent bodies in advocating for and directing technical expertise, to ensure data disaggregation for youth to enable the measurement of outputs and outcomes for youth.

8. Youth research

Evidence is the cornerstone of successful advocacy for, and delivery through, youth mainstreaming. Ideally, the youth sector, perhaps in partnership with other research agencies, should be involved in creating substantive quantitative and qualitative data on young people, and consistently developing new knowledge in the youth sector.

9. Disseminating good practice

Research and policy units should design comprehensive case studies and disseminate good practice on youth mainstreaming, while research and policy units across sectors should work collaboratively to ensure research to support an enabling environment for young people.

6.5 Mainstreaming youth development and youth work approaches

The youth sector must be the champion of youth empowerment practice and ensure that youth empowerment paradigms are integrated into the work of all sectors. It is predominantly, but certainly not exclusively, in the youth sector that expertise in these paradigms will prevail, given the training provided by youth work and youth studies programmes across the world.¹² Table 6.1 elaborates on some youth work approaches adopted by the youth sector to facilitate youth empowerment.

6.6 Conclusion

In an optimally functioning structure, the youth sector will be the driving force determining the vision, strategies and outcomes of youth mainstreaming in all other sectors. This will also include mainstreaming the unique qualities of the

Table 6.1 Integrating youth work approaches to youth mainstreaming

Youth work	Youth work is at the core of youth development practice. The Commonwealth defines youth work as all forms of '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.' ³
Attributes of youth work	Implications for multi-sectoral work
<p>Building citizenship (protagonism/agency) and promoting human rights: A key function of youth work is supporting young people to be active as citizens. Citizenship building is 'a dynamic and relational process. It requires a commitment by society to reorder social relationships based on fundamental political values of freedom and democracy. To promote responsible citizenship in a meaningful and durable way, we need to better understand the nature of this social project of citizenisation and why it is often fragile and incomplete'.⁴ The agency of citizens is core to human rights principles.</p>	<p>Ensure that young people are perceived and engaged with as citizens in cross-sectoral programme cycles where their agency and influence is respected.</p> <p>Ensure capacity building for young people in building citizenship with inter-sectoral support.</p>
<p>Developing leadership and life skills/employability skills: Youth work supports young people's ability to develop democratic leadership skills and engage with society in non-combative, constructive ways, while achieving the objectives of their own wellbeing. 'Employability skills' are a set of life skills that enhances young people's ability to engage professionally in work life, as well as contribute to, and benefit from, a decent and non-exploitative work environment.⁵</p>	<p>Integrate leadership and life skills work with young people into day-to-day activities with them, as relevant to your sector.</p>
<p>Encouraging associative life: Building connectedness with others helps strengthen team work, build respect for diversity and create social cohesion. It multiplies the effects of young people's influence on communities and society. It also contributes to building democratic leadership skills, as discussed above. Associative life can take place in multiple forms including through youth clubs, youth movements, international youth networks, informal groups and so on.⁶</p>	<p>Support young people to build collective strength. For example, in the employment sector, this could mean creating a supportive environment for young people's groups to address youth-specific employment issues, or strengthening the ability of young people, including young women, to have a voice in mainstream labour collectives.</p>
<p>Social and political education: Youth work helps the education/emancipation of young people (seen as a two-way process between the young person and youth worker, both learning together), including experiential learning through their everyday lives. It also supports young people to understand their individual and collective experiences in terms of the sociopolitical context which they inhabit. This 'educative engagement' with youth workers and their everyday experiences provides valuable life skills. Youth work also involves the 'fostering of critical thinking in young people, who are able to analyse their own social and political context in order to be able to act on them, including analysing class, gender, religion and other identity-related dynamics'.⁷</p>	<p>Support young people to develop and strengthen their social and political knowledge, in order to understand and influence the youth-specific dimensions of multi-sectoral work. For example, in the health sector, how do broader health policies influence their access (or lack thereof) to health, including reproductive healthcare? How do young people engage with these issues?</p>

<p>Creativity and expression/leisure: In the youth sector, enhancing young people's ability to express themselves through creative forms of theatre, the arts, literature and so on is a fundamental part of holistic empowerment. In youth work, leisure activities such as sports or adventure become a 'means' to an end of learning together with youth workers. For example, a football game can be a site where young people learn about leadership, team work and collaboration, as discussed above.</p>	<p>Encourage young people's creativity, and support leisure activities. For example, in the justice sector, young people in contact with the legal system and in prisons could be involved in creative expression and participation in sport – to facilitate personal growth and minimise future conflict with the law, drug misuse etc.</p>
<p>Information sharing: Information is at the core of supporting young people to empower themselves. Meaningful youth participation is not possible without adequate information about services/policies. Youth work ensures that the right kind of updated information is constantly shared with young people in youth-friendly formats and media.</p>	<p>Ensure that information is shared with young people in youth-friendly formats and processes relevant to your sector. For example, in reproductive health, cater to young people's information needs in ways that are useful and attractive to them.</p>
<p>Intercultural learning: Intercultural learning is a fundamental aspect of peace building and developing respect and understanding, and is a major thematic area in youth work, particularly in contexts of ethnic/racial hostilities and armed conflict.</p>	<p>Look for and remedy intercultural tensions through youth work processes in your areas of work.</p>
<p>Professional care: Considering young people's evolving capacities, 'professional care' refers to a youth worker's ability to provide detached care to the young men and women he or she engages with. Ways in which a youth worker performs the role of 'professional carer' are complex and dynamic.⁸</p>	<p>Work with the youth sector to integrate youth work and professional care functions for young people where relevant. For example, justice sector, youth in detention.</p>
<p>Professionalising youth work</p>	
<p>A core function, then, of the youth sector is ensuring the professionalisation of youth work, including through the recognition of youth work as a professional category; the formation of professional associations that can define and protect the standards of the profession; setting competency standards, developing qualifications and certification in line with standards;⁹ and validation and supervision, as well as embracing a common set of ethical standards.¹⁰ The caveat at the Commonwealth is that professionalisation is strongly linked to values and principles, and a focus on specific forms of rights-based, asset-based and enabling youth work that is endorsed as professional practice.¹¹</p>	<p>Higher education and training institutes need to work with the youth sector in identifying professional needs of youth workers and developing responsive training and degree programmes. All sectors also need to develop an understanding of the value of youth work competencies in sector staff in implementing youth-mainstreamed approaches.</p>

profession of youth work into the work of all sectors. The youth sector's own explicit identity as a consolidation of multiple players, and its ability to work collaboratively with the strengths of each player in the sector, will help the sector contribute to and oversee youth mainstreaming effectively.



Box 6.2 Reflections on Chapter 6: The Role of the Youth Sector

- In your context, is the youth sector well co-ordinated among the players discussed above?
- Which of the above players in the youth sector are active in your context?
- Are they provided with the capacity to support youth mainstreaming across sectors?
- If not, what needs to be done to strengthen the youth sector and its engagement with other sectors?

Notes

- 1 Council of Europe 2004, 74.
- 2 Adapted from Rai 2003, 26.
- 3 This is a revised version of the definition appearing in Commonwealth Youth Programme, Asia Centre 2012, 11. This publication also provides the basic tenets of youth work championed by the Commonwealth.
- 4 Kymlicka 2013, 92.
- 5 Nicholls 2012, 14–15: 'Employability skills are different from employment skills which build specific profession-related skills and competencies. Employability, rather than employment training, is usually the focus of youth work. It is useful to remember that, "the purpose of youth work is not to fuel the labour market ... the youth service is not a career service; it is not a direct employer of the young. It does improve employability, however".'
- 6 The Commonwealth Secretariat's Commonwealth Youth Council and the Commonwealth Students' Association are two forms of such associative life developed in international youth work. In the youth sector worldwide, youth clubs and youth parliaments are a dominant form of national/local forms of associative life.
- 7 Commonwealth Youth Programme, Asia Centre 2012, 10.
- 8 Ibid., 15.
- 9 See Commonwealth Youth Programme, Caribbean Centre 2012.
- 10 For more information, see Commonwealth Youth Programme, Asia Centre 2012.
- 11 See also Ord 2012.
- 12 The Commonwealth Diploma in Youth Development Work and the upcoming University of the West Indies Degree in Youth Development, which form part of the Commonwealth Degree Consortium on Youth Work, are examples.

References

- Commonwealth Youth Programme, Asia Centre (2012), *Professional Youth Work: A Concept and Strategies*, Commonwealth Secretariat, London.
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