

Foreword

Rt. Hon. Don McKinnon, Commonwealth Secretary-General

Most of the world is young. The rest of us have all been young. But it is easy to forget that we are young in a particular social setting. In the developed world, education systems and other institutions may treat youth as a rehearsal for 'real' life. In the developing world, adult responsibilities can come only too soon, leaving hardly a space for childhood. But despite the contrast, something usually lacking in both scenarios is *control* over one's life; a chance to really contribute to the decision-making that affects us. This escapes our attention because we're more likely to think of youth as part of the life cycle, than youth as a social grouping. The advice we give, even to ourselves, is too often: 'wait until you're grown up.'

Postponing young people's participation in this way can be very destructive. In economic terms, it represents a waste of human resources. The loss is more serious now than ever before; social and economic changes today promise benefits that can only be realised through and with young people. Failing that challenge promises grave costs. As this book shows, the alternative to youth empowerment is not the status quo but something far worse. HIV/AIDS is dismantling decades of progress on living standards and life expectancy, decades of development and centuries of cultural memory. Our environment is under threat. Unemployment is rife. This is not a time to sit on our hands. Young people are either part of the effort, or the effort fails.

The Commonwealth Plan of Action on Youth Empowerment, endorsed by Heads of Government in 1999, states that young people are themselves the best resource for their development.

Wherever I go in the Commonwealth, I find this confirmed: young people have strong, constructive views about the development of their communities. I am also impressed by their ability to forge international networks of knowledge and opinion through information technology – again, a theme borne out in this book. So the talent and energy is there to be mobilised. Let's all of us in government, NGOs and the wider community 'think globally and act locally' on youth participation. There are plenty of examples here worth emulating.

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We are currently witnessing a change in the status of young people – from being mere recipients of adult-led programmes to being active decision-makers. But while many organisations want to be part of this change, they do not know how. This book therefore could not have come at a better time.

I do not believe the decision to involve the young can be postponed. In Africa, HIV/AIDS is succeeding where malaria, slavery and civil strife have failed – it is threatening a continent of young people. Perhaps the question to older generations is: what do you plan to do without us?

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