SARPN Southern African
Regional Poverty Network

YOUTH VOLUNTARISM IN SOUTH AFRICA

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PROSPECTS FOR YOUTH ENGAGEMENT IN POVERTY REDUCTION DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMMES

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Contents

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YOUTH VOLUNTARISM IN SOUTH AFRICA: PROSPECTS FOR YOUTH ENGAGEMENT IN POVERTY REDUCTION DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMMES

By Richard M. Mkandawire

Introduction

Young People in South Africa have historically been at the epicentre of political and social change. During the mid 1970s and 1980s, they played a catalytic role as foot soldiers in the anti-apartheid struggles; thousands were detained, tortured or were forced into exile. Hundreds died in prison or in conflict. There is concern among most black people in South Africa, especially young people, that while apartheid is gone, it's ripple of effects continue to reverberate in their lives.

There is particular concern that large sections of the youth particularly those who live in rural areas have become marginalized and are not effectively participating in the transformation process. The youth are seen in a fundamental sense as dis-empowered and excluded.

The inability (perceived or real) of the most promising, and largest of South Africa's population to participate constructively in the socio-economic transformation of the new South Africa to which they contribute so much, or to which they feel they can contribute to, is undoubtedly a source of deep frustration for many young people. Frustration that in many townships and cities is manifested in the growing levels of youth crime and violence, increased incidence of teenage pregnancies, growing levels of drug and alcohol abuse, increased exposure and rise in contracting HIV/AIDS, indiscipline at school etc.

The inability of most young men and women to calve a definitive niche within the productive sectors of the South African society, the uncertainty surrounding their future employment prospects, the cultural penetration of negative role models, all contribute tot he social reproduction of youth as dysfunctional members of the South African society.

This paper argues for increased youth involvement in the national development discourse and implementation. It is argued in the paper that the involvement of youth in the unfolding development processes should not be always externally induced. Young people should proactively seek to be part of the process of development, rather that waiting for authorities to cajole them into participation.
The paper makes a case for young peoples engagement in voluntary work as one of the critical interventions in poverty reduction programmes.

A Rational for Youth Engagement in Voluntary work

Young people should perceive their involvement in voluntary development work as their human right. Their participation should be perceived not only as part of their development process as they acquire new knowledge and skills but also as a direct contribution to the national development efforts. It is particularly critical that young people are engaged in voluntary work because the vast majority of them are currently unemployed or under employed. It is estimated that close to 6 million young people aged between 14 and 35 are unemployed in South Africa.

In many communities, particularly townships many unemployed youth spend most of their day around streets, or shops, cafes and shebeens. In an environment where social amenities and recreational facilities are minimal, young people find new social spaces to cope with their state of deprivation. It is around shops where are socialized, where they are able to define their role models, where they receive their sex education, where indeed they are criminalized.

In Limpopo province, for instance young peoples' state of idleness around shops is termed park shopping. Young men and women can spend an entire day around a shop seemingly doing nothing. Yet park shopping has emerged as a major institution for the socialization of young people. It is around shops that the young are schooled into the ways of the community. It is around shops where young people learn the latest fashions, they learn of where the next casual wear might be available, they learn how to band together as a youth subculture. It is also around shops that they acquire risky behavioral related habits, such as drinking and smoking and it is around the shops where they are exposed to unsafe sex. (Mkandawire et al 2001). This is of course a legacy of apartheid, which systematically neglected rural areas, which were perceived as largely labour reserves for the metropolitan areas.

Existing youth social networks such as the "park shopping" phenomenon, should be perceived as a social asset that could be utilized by authorities as a basis for mobilizing young people for voluntary work. Young people who have already developed a bonding culture and who are searching for new livelihood opportunities, and other spaces for their livelihoods, should be mobilized and provided with appropriate training to work as volunteers in a wide range of development settings where their skills might be required.

The paper therefore calls on young people to begin volunteering their human capital as a basis for their engagement in the national development agenda and as a basis of their own growth. It is of course also acknowledged in the paper that the spirit of voluntarism is new in South Africa. The educational system of the past with it's emphasis on spoon feeding learners, compounded by the ideology of apartheid engendered the very ethos of voluntarism resulting in the inculcation of a spirit of rebellion and apathy towards government initiated development.

This attitude unfortunately still lingers on in local communities, as well as among young people themselves. This is reflected most aptly in the saying that a "**white man's job doesn't finish**", hence justifying not finishing given tasks on time; justifying leaving at 5 o'clock even in when spending an additional five minutes would have ensured the completion of an urgent task.

The concept Masakhane is confounded with this mind set of the past, which clearly should be deconstructed. The new mindset should also be accompanied by a re-conceptualization of who the youth are. There is need for a common understanding of this segment of society to ensure that programmes in place establish a common understanding of whom they are targeting.

Who are Youth in South Africa?

The national Youth Policy defines youth as any persons between the ages of 14 and 35 years. This is a very broad definition of youth. It is a definition that embraces varied categories of the youth, which have been exposed to different socio-political and historical experiences. A 35-year-old youth lived during a period of heightened political conflicts, when he or she was a learner in school, while a 14-year-old youth is growing up in an environment when many of the new reforms and achievements of the struggles are being realized. (National Youth Policy 2000 1996).

The concept youth, remains controversial, it is on the whole a social construction, portraying different meanings to different segments of the population. For some people it portrays a violent undisciplined criminal element in society; for others, it connotes and excluded marginalized segment of the population.

One public perception of youth is their being portrayed as rebels against the political and social order, as destructive and anti-social. During the apartheid period in the 1970s and 80s, this was the general perception of the ruling regime and public opinion as reflected in the media.

The concept "youth" was not only linked to black "youths" but also to violence. Responsible adults and law-abiding citizens could not be violent but only irresponsible, deviants; black youths were seen as violent (Seekings 1993). Abdi, Au (1999), provides an extreme analysis of the public view of the youth. He observes that:

> *In the public mind the youth are being converted into latter day savages: demented, destructive, demonised. The images are archetypal, primal, the stuff of thousand year myths and sweaty nightmares of beasts baying outside the city gates, shadows that swing along the edge of bone-fire, figures watching from a distance, moving their own peculiar rhythm, ready to violate the zones of order and reason.*

Within the youth structures, in South Africa no serious attempt has been made to conceptualize "the youth" they are dealing with. There has been a rather hurried acceptance of the age range 14 to 35 as youth without taking into account, not only public perception of who the youth are, but also what and why various government departments and sectors have identified as their youth target groups.

For instance the White Paper on Social Welfare (1997), defines a young person as a woman or man aged between 16 to 30 years, while the Child Care Act (1983) defines a child as a male or female aged from 0 to 18 years. Besides age, there are also inconsistencies on rights given to males and females at different ages.

Sociologically, youth denotes and interface between childhood and adulthood. Many organizations consider the ages between 0 and 14 as childhood category, although UNICEF stretches its childhood category up to the age of 18. Within this childhood age segment also falls the adolescent category, which is defined by WHO as falling between the ages of 10 and 19.

Law, public policy and social perception also variously define youth. In many countries in Africa, laws define adulthood as commencing from age 21, although in recent years there has been an attempt to lower this age to 18 years. However, for most countries, 21 remain the age at which many of the trappings of legal adulthood are assumed. No consensus exists though among countries or even within government with respect to the legal age of majority for all purposes. Minimum ages often vary not only sex, but also according to the purpose of the age limit – marriage, voting rights, criminal responsibility, military service, access to alcoholic beverage, consent to medical treatment, consent to sexual intercourse, etc.

Adult's perception of youth is validated by an ideology of dominance. Adults tend to prescribe the role of the youth, by defining and limiting their responsibilities, opportunities and status. In many countries in Africa, those labeled as "youth" are generally perceived as young, or irresponsible, thus providing justification for their being "excluded" in key decision-making positions. Youth are perceived as having functional deficiencies and in need of nurturing. In other countries, youth are perceived as delinquents, down class, male and violent. In South Africa for instance, during the apartheid era, youth were largely black and criminals. Thus while some youth never become "youth", some seem unable to out grow the label (Camaroff 1999)

This dominant negative social perception of the youth has been associated with addressing youth issues from a social welfare perspective. The welfare perspective views young people as presenting problems, which need to be solved through the intervention of older people. Young people are reduced to passive objects upon which interventions must act, rather than as active subjects participating in shaping their lives and communities.

Like the general social perception of youth, the social welfare approach tends to be based on a range of negative assumptions about young people. They are at best unable to take care of themselves and at worst responsible for crime and violence.

It is these negative perceptions of youth that are usually responsible for their exclusion in development. It must therefore be appreciated that calling for youth voluntarism by adults is a contradiction in terms. Society, which perceives young people negatively, which down plays their innate capabilities, as architects of their own development, should deconstruct and reconstruct it's conceptual understanding of whom a youth is before, in calls for their participation in voluntary work.

Methodology for Youth Participation in Voluntary Work

The mobilization of youth into voluntary work is an important strategy of empowering young people and affirming their centrality in national development programs. Poverty reduction programs could benefit immeasurably through the engagement of youth as an additional human capital. The proper selection of participants and the manner in which they are selected and managed will largely determine the success and sustainability their continued participation in voluntary work.

Voluntarism not Coercion

Experience in a number of countries in Africa, points out towards a tendency of using young people largely as a tool for political control. This was particularly the case during the first decade of Africa's independence when the ruling party functionaries as largely purveyors of the ruling party ideology used such youth movements as the Malawi Young Pioneers, the Ghana Young Pioneers, The Zambia National Youth Service, and the Boys Brigades of Botswana.

Malawi under the dictatorial régime of Banda in the 1970 to the 80s perhaps displayed the most blatant abuse of young people as instruments of political control. Under Banda's regime the young pioneers, whom it was believed were carrying out voluntary work, became extremely unpopular among the general population for their sometimes ruthless and coercive manner in mobilizing local communities for development goals and supporting the ruling party. They were partially renown in the country for their blind appeals to the population (through the combination of paternalism and sanctimonious exhortations) for "Unity, Obedience, Loyalty and Discipline" (Malawi congress party four corner stones), as a means of creating rural stability for the intensification of commodity production (Mkandawire 1984).

Those who failed to follow these exhortations, such as Jehovah's witness were not only denied access to public services (turned off busses, denied access to markets, health clinics) but often received corporal punishment from the young pioneers and many were forced into detention or exile with the tacit support of the ruling regime.

As Banda put it in support of the Young Pioneers excesses "Witnesses have no right against young pioneers who feel disposed to beat them, if they go to the police, but is the police not government? If they do not get satisfaction from the police, they go to the district commissioner, is the district commissioner not government? They go to the chief, is the chief not government?" (Williams 1978 Malawi; p 349)

This was clearly not voluntarism. While these excesses of using young people as instruments for political control, may be seen as extreme, there is a danger even in the current democratic environment of South Africa that youth voluntarism could be abused by political interests groups to further their own ends. To avoid this; it might be necessary to encourage   civil society organizations to take a lead in the mobilization of young people for voluntary work. On the basis of experience gleaned from various African countries the following should be considered in the mobilization of youth for voluntary work.

Clearly Defined Target Groups and Activities

A task force or an NGO responsible for the mobilization of young people for voluntary work should clearly define its target groups, by age, education as well as location. It is also critical to identify the entry point for the mobilization of young people. The following entry points should be considered: community structures, (CBO's, traditional initiation institutions, churches, mosques, youth clubs etc…) academic institutions (schools, universities, technikons etc…), youth NGOs etc…

Clearly Defined Activities or Programmes

Local structures such as CBO's or schools, universities as well as young people, etc… should be given the opportunity to define not only the types of activities or programmes they would want to be engaged in, but also the modus operandi of the voluntary work. More critically local structures and the young people that might be involved in voluntary work must perceive their engagement as likely to provide some utility either to them as individuals or their immediate community.

Incentives in Youth Voluntary Work

It is important to appreciate that voluntary work in Africa, is not new. In many communities in Africa villagers have risen to the occasion in times of disasters; the young and the old are regularly mobilized to participate in communal construction of roads, bridges, schools etc… The driving force for participation is the belief that the activity will be of direct to them as a community. They perceive their contribution as part of their responsibility to the "extended" family community.

This spirit may not be in existence in rather complex communities where the level of solidarity is not as strong as at the village level where familial relationships exist. The absence of such solidarity coupled with limited and deteriorating livelihood opportunities, most young people particularly in urban areas would require additional incentives to participate in voluntary work.

Those responsible for mobilization of youth should therefore carefully explore the types of incentives that could be built into the voluntary program to ensure that young people, not only make an optional contribution, but also that they do not perceive authorities as abusing their labor and intellectual capacities.

It is therefore critical that voluntary work is perceived as providing some utility to young people. Voluntary work should be structured and be perceived as a learning environment for young people. Young people should exit from voluntary work, having acquired not only knowledge and skills, but also some form of recognition. Voluntary work should be structured in such a way that it becomes a conduit for new livelihood opportunities for young people. Voluntary work should be structured in such a manner that it provides an opportunity for young people to build positive relationships with adults, and enable them to identify their life goals and change themselves to achieve these goals.

What Contributions can Youth make to Voluntary Work in South Africa

Before identifying what young people can contribute to voluntary work, it is critical to acknowledge that young people have a contribution to make. It is also critical to acknowledge that young people cannot be developed by outsiders. As the government explores the concept of youth voluntarism, the government and civil society organization should avoid perceiving young people as mere targets of the new concept, or perceiving them as instruments in the popularization of the concept.

Voluntary work itself should be designed, managed and implemented by young people themselves. There is need to acknowledge that young people intuitively know that they need and will often succeed if they are helped along the way. The issue being raised here is one of action; young people acting upon themselves rather than being acted upon; of young people being agents of change in their own lives rather than being by standers in the development process (MacDonald et al 2000:173).

What is required is to explore ways in what young people can be facilitated to maximize their own creative potential, affirm their own creative potential, and affirm their own power to create their own norms and modes of voluntary work and development.

While there are a number of areas where young people could be involved as volunteers, for illustrative purposes, this paper would like to cite three critical development related areas where youth could make positive contribution through offering voluntary services. These areas identified are literacy, environment and health.

Youth as Literacy Volunteers

Literate youth can be utilized as volunteers in literacy campaigns. UNESCO has identified the inadequacy of trained adult educators as one of the major bottlenecks in the eradication of illiteracy (UNESCO 1970:75). Young people, the majority of whom are literate, should serve as relatively cheaper to remunerate educators.

Young people could particularly play the role of volunteers in literacy campaigns at the family level. The family based literacy approach, is particularly useful because it could help reduce problems associated with dropouts and relapses due to lack of follow-ups. Young people **residing** within the same community as their parents and other members of the extended family could be recruited and trained in literacy education. This approach is more cost effective than other approaches, where adults are used because the youth literacy volunteer does not have to travel to an outside community, the educated youth gets satisfaction by helping his or her own kith and kin.

From the illiterates' own perspective, being taught by one of their own cushions the stigma often associated by illiterate adults exposing their illiteracy to people outside their communities (Mkandawire and Siamwiza1997).

Youth Voluntarism in Environmental Preservation

The call for youth voluntarism in environmental preservation is being made in the context of agenda 21 discussion of the Rio Summit. Chapter 25 of Agenda 21 calls on all governments to involve the youth in the protection of the environment and the promotion of economic and social development.

Governments have been urged to involve youth in environmental conservation, not only for the simple reason that they are the pool of human resource that needs to be tapped, but also because, there is recognition that young people could bring unique perspectives to the debate on environmental conservation and sustainable development.

Young people are often victims of environmental degradation and the abuse of natural resources by adults. For instance in many rural communities in South Africa increasingly women are spending more time in search of fuel wood. A number of such female youth and children are usually given this chore as a daily responsibility. For most youth and children, this interferes with their schooling and makes it increasingly difficult for some parents to send their female children to school.

In a number of countries in Africa young people are already engaged in environmental conservation. In Uganda Tanzania, Kenya, Zimbabwe Lesotho and Malawi young people are responsible for planting millions of trees with high survival rates,

The youth plant them for fuel wood, fruit, folder and timber. The youth are also involved in uprooting alien trees and the construction of water and soil conservation structures. While the same can be said of South Africa, no conscious effort so far has been made to mobilize youth as a strategy in environmental conservation. The almost 6 million unemployed youth in South Africa are a critical mass that could contribute significantly to current environmental conservation efforts in the country.

School leavers should for instance be requested to volunteer there between schools to college time to contribute to environmental conservation activities. As literate persons they have a fairly good understanding why conservation of their environment is critical for the sustainable development of their country

Youth Voluntarism in HIV/AIDS Campaigns

In the wake of the increasing HIV/AIDS infection in South Africa, there is acknowledgement that, new awareness campaigns, care and as well as mitigation strategies should be explored. Young people have in the past 3 years been centrally engaged in HIV/AIDS awareness campaigns; notably in KwaZulu Natal and the Free State where young people who have been tested as sero- positive have emerged as ambassadors of positive living. These young ambassadors are not simply engaged in awareness campaigns, but they are also involved in counseling and the promotion of support groups among those who are living with the virus. These young people see themselves as providing a genuine contribution to society, which so often looks down upon those who are living with the virus.

This programme has also emerged as a model of good practice in other countries in Southern Africa, notably in Zambia, Malawi and Botswana where young ambassadors of positive living through the support of the Commonwealth Youth Programme have established their own networks and are beginning to talk to each other and share experiences on positive living at the regional level.
The utilization of young people as volunteers in HIV/AIDS programs, is not only a good practice, as young people are one's who are most at risk, but also because young people have an informed perspective on their health needs and problems. Young people have the capacity to communicate messages to their peers in a style and language that is attractive and accessible to them.

It is particularly important that efforts are made to encourage tertiary institution students to participate in voluntary work in the HIV/AIDS campaigns, not only because this is a pool of intellectual and human underutilized capital, but also because tertiary institutions do not have clear policies on the subject. Involvement of students would in a sense begin to set a stage for internal institutional reflection on what needs to be done within each campus in addressing the HIV/AIDS pandemic.

The involvement of tertiary institutions as volunteers in HIV/AIDS campaigns could provide a new national dimension in their approaches; from their own point of views, as learners and "learned" people plus their own credibility in the eyes of their audiences, particularly among other young people who might not have the same level of education as they have, tertiary students could serve as a powerful tool in stimulating the desired behavioral change. They could provide powerful advice on the way in which the government, NGOs and other institutions could more effectively use existing limited resources promoting HIV/AIDS educational campaigns

Tertiary institutions have after all the necessary expertise to mobilize and train students in the broad area of HIV/AIDS, including peer counseling, as well as research that might be required in any voluntary work in this area. Students in such disciplines as health, sciences and social work could be encouraged to participate as volunteers in HIV/AIDS educational awareness and counseling services.
Such students would, not only be offering a very much-needed service to the community, but also they would be acquiring new knowledge that could enhance their professional competencies.

Given the high levels of HIV/AIDS infections particularly among young people it is recommended that tertiary institutions not only develop policies to inform how they intend to address the problem, but also how they could directly link up with current government and NGO efforts in addressing the growing levels of the infection.

Conclusion

The government does not have adequate resources to meet all the demands for national transformation. No amount of finance can address the growing levels of unemployment, the escalating HIV/AIDS pandemic, the growing wave of crime, violence and abuse, the high levels of illiteracy and the scarcity of adequate housing landless ness and various other development challenges. Yet the government can, and should consider investing in its underutilized human capital as a resource for development. The youth who constitute of over a third of the national population are a critical source of human capital that remains underutilized. Government has until recently least prioritized this segment of the population.

Even in the present post apartheid period, youth as a resource are still in the process of being defined and conceptualized. Hence there are limited programmes that are beginning to tap on this reservoir of human capital. The limited programmes on place tend to be fragmented and uncoordinated. The concept of youth volunteerism as part and parcel of a national programme for renewal of the underutilized human capital should urgently be explored at the national level. It is recommended that this forum should explore how best young people could be mobilized to engage in poverty reduction programmes run by government and civil society organizations.

Young people who have historically been catalysts for change, and bore the blunt of the apartheid conflicts, should not only be facilitated to take centre stage in the national development, but also they should vociferously demand in the spirit of their past struggles as their human right to participate. Their engagement in voluntary work could serve as a window of opportunity for their own development and emancipation from being perpetually labeled youth.

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