

THE CARIBBEAN YOUTH DEVELOPMENT AGENDA: FROM SOCIAL WELFARE TO TRANSFORMATION

**REMARKS BY HENRY CHARLES REGIONAL DIRECTOR OF THE
COMMONWEALTH YOUTH PROGRAMME CARIBBEAN CENTRE(CYPCC)
AT THE LAUNCHING OF THE NATIONAL CONSULTATION ON
PROFESSIONALIAZTION OF YOUTH DEVELOPMENT WORK IN MONTEGO
BAY, JAMAICA ON JANUARY 18TH 2007.**

Salutations

DISTINGUISHED CHAIRPERSON,

Permit me on behalf of the Director of Youth Affairs, Dr. Fatiha Serour and the entire team at the Commonwealth Youth Programme (CYP) to extend our most profound appreciation to the Government and people of Jamaica for the invaluable support provided to CYP over the years.

I also wish to express my gratitude to the National Youth Development Agency for deciding to initiate this most important consultative process on the professionalization of youth development work.

Hosting this consultative process is a tangible demonstration of your commitment to four important imperatives of a transformational approach to youth development. These are:

- Adoption of a participatory approach
- The need to build effective partnerships

- Adoption of a professional approach to youth development work
- Adoption of a strategic approach to youth development.

Distinguished ladies and gentlemen, please be assured of our highest consideration in this regard.

I want also to pay tribute to all of you, distinguished ladies and gentlemen who are engaged in the challenging, yet noble profession of Youth development. Far too often, your dedication, hard work and perseverance remain unrecognized and poorly rewarded. I want to assure you that the CYP remains eternally grateful for the sterling contribution you have and continue to make towards sustainable youth development in the Caribbean.

CHAIRMAN,

I crave your indulgence to place in proper perspective this very important issue of the professionalization of youth development work.

Within recent times there is growing panic among the citizenry regarding the negative manifestations of youth socialization and development.

From Belmopan, Belize to Georgetown, Guyana the widely held view among social commentators is that the Caribbean seems to be facing a virtual crisis in youth development. Such concerns and opinions have dominated newspaper columns, the various 'TALK SHOWS' and other popular media. Consequently Governments are under increasing pressure to formulate and implement effective strategies to address the perceived crisis.

The truth is that youth development in the Caribbean has assumed a far more complex and challenging character over the last two decades.

Prevailing economic, social and political ethos have not only conspired to undermine the capacity of the state to effectively perform its role as a facilitator of economic and social justice but has also diminish the prevalence of traditional modes of socialization and indeed the influence of institutions such as the family, church, schools and of many civic organizations.

Yet despite this ever changing and challenging socio-economic, socio-political and socio-cultural environment none can honestly deny that many if not most young persons in the Commonwealth Caribbean have successfully managed the challenges posed by this new ethos. Indeed many young people continue to make significant contributions to the development of their communities and societies.

However we must be concerned that disturbingly significant numbers of young people are increasingly becoming the victims of social injustice, social exclusion and economic marginalization.

Consequently the youth development landscape is replete with examples of:

- Increasing hopelessness among many young persons.
- Increasing engagement of significant numbers of youth in risky behaviors.

- An apparent exodus away from involvement in traditional civic and community based activities.
- Growing trends of poverty among urban and now increasingly rural youths.
- Disturbing trends of disrespect and disregard for symbols of authority and officialdom.
- Adoption of new and controversial methods of expressing their frustrations, issues and concerns.
- Increasing impatience with procedure and bureaucratic systems and structures.
- Increasing involvement of young persons in socially deviant behaviors.

There are those who argue that these challenges are either the consequence of the pervasive influence of popular but usually socially degrading and often non-indigenous sub-cultures and norms or that these serve to exacerbate the problem. *(I recommend this preposition for further interrogation by the cadre of social scientists at our prestigious institutions of higher learning.)*

However another disturbing trend is the effectiveness of criminal organizations and socially deviant forces and agents in filling the gap created by the declining influence of the “*once upon a time*” bastions of social order and civic responsibility.

Faced with such challenges, Governments, development agencies and other non-governmental organizations have to large extent switched to panic mode. To be fair to the governments of the region no one can honestly deny that most if not all have demonstrated some measure of concern for the youth. However, with very few exceptions their response to these youth development challenges remains social-welfarist and sporadic in nature.

Further in many instances the existing youth development agencies and structures are inadequately funded, accorded very little importance in the ministerial hierarchy and more often than not, it is only the sheer commitment and dedication of youth development workers which has prevented the total collapse of the youth development architecture.

Permit me therefore to examine some of these responses and initiatives governments and some other youth development agencies have adopted.

- In most jurisdictions National Youth Policies have been formulated but these to a large extent have remained simply statements of philosophical principles and intent.
- A plethora of Youth enterprise programmes and diverse models and concepts of youth employment schemes have been implemented. Unfortunately many of these are under funded and not adequately aligned to broader national development goals. Further in most cases there is no

credible evaluation mechanism to determine whether or not these are having any significant impact on youth unemployment and economic empowerment.

- Most countries have adopted various models of youth participation and empowerment, including but not limited to appointment of youth representatives on boards and various committees. However the optimum impact of these initiatives are usually undermined by the fluctuating dispositions of governments, the disproportionate influence of other entrenched interests, absence of a supportive policy or legislative framework, lack of technical support and the inadequacy of youth networks themselves.
- Commemoration of youth weeks and months is now a common feature of the national calendar in most countries. Though commendable these are not supported by appropriate strategies to ensure sustainability of the various themes and outcomes.
- There are now many school based initiatives, presumably to stem violent and socially deviant behavior among students. Yet many of these initiatives are not evidenced based.
- Increased expenditure in law enforcement and penal services. Yet there is crying need for reform of the penal system and juvenile justice systems.
- Ironically while many governments may have increased investment in sporting infrastructure, there is an evident decline in comprehensive sustainable sporting and healthy lifestyles programmes.

- A plethora of HIV/AIDS awareness programmes exist in the Caribbean. Yet many of these programmes are neither youth driven nor asset based in approach.

Consequently whereas at the micro level there are some success stories however from a macro perspective the impact and relevance of the prevailing youth development strategies remains at best speculative. It must be noted further that whereas some jurisdictions have crafted and adopted various evaluation tools and mechanisms to quantify the impact of youth development programmes in the main these remain non-existent. This may very well be one of the reasons why the prevailing youth development strategy framework is overpopulated with 'feel good' programmes and projects which have little or no profound impact on the Caribbean youth development landscape.

FROM SOCIAL WELFARIST TO TRANSFORMATIONAL

Taking into consideration the perceived youth development crisis in the Caribbean and the apparent inadequacy of the existing youth development strategies, I wish to propose that a paradigm shift from a social welfarist to transformational approach is long overdue. What therefore are the main characteristics of this transformational approach which I advocate?

First of all it demands an evidenced based approach to youth development work. We must abandon the idea of our youth work strategies being informed mainly by

myths, emotions and stereotyping. Our strategies should be based upon empirical data and truth.

Secondly we must adopt a rights based approach to youth development. We must disabuse our minds of the idea that young people are problems to be addressed and instead embrace the fact that their like any other citizen have a right to sustainable livelihoods and that they also have a right to advocate their needs, desires, fears and opinions and further must be accorded appropriate and adequate opportunities to fulfill their needs and aspirations.

But perhaps most importantly the time is overdue for governments and youth development agencies to adopt a strategic approach to youth development. This requires the formulation of a strategic youth development plan which includes a clear vision, definable and attainable goals and objectives, precise performance indicators and credible evaluation strategies. The vision and goals of this strategic plan must be aligned to the broader national development goals. Further it is imperative that appropriate implementation mechanisms be adopted to ensure policy is transformed into action.

I wish to submit that the adoption and implementation of a strategic youth development plan will among other benefits facilitate a credible process of consultation and inclusion, as the success of the plan will to a large extent depend on the genuine participation of youth and other relevant stakeholders. The strategic development plan provides a more effective framework and enabling environment to implement comprehensive and sustainable programmes

which will have a more profound impact on the youth development landscape than the current cacophony of “feel good” initiatives and activities.

Further once properly managed it should also facilitate more efficient utilization of public and private resources.

Fellow youth development professionals, ladies and gentlemen!

It is in the context of this transformational approach to youth development that the issue of professionalizing youth development work assumes much relevance.

The goal of the professionalization agenda is to create the enabling environment for youth development workers to become empowered as effective professionals, equipped with the relevant theoretical knowledge, skills and requisite competencies to undertake an appropriate leadership role in advocating, formulating and implementing a more strategic approach to the youth development in the Caribbean.

CYP and its trusted partners have taken the first step by providing opportunities for youth development workers to pursue specialized training in youth development work and ongoing development of relevant competency standards for youth development work.

We are now inviting other stakeholders including government to assist the process by:

- According youth development workers appropriate recognition thru the provision of employment opportunities and meaningful engagement in the social, economic and political reform agenda.
- Facilitating the development of a significant and credible body of knowledge on youth development thru appropriate research and publication.
- Establishing effective quality assurance mechanisms thru the relevant policy and legislative framework.
- Creating additional opportunities for advance learning and training in the area of youth development work.

Finally, let me remind you that unless youth development is accorded its rightful place within the national development agenda, efforts to reform, reshape and reposition our economic, social, political and governance systems will be severely undermined, and sustainable national development will remain but a fleeting illusion, to be pursued, but never attained.

Thank you!!

