

REDEFINING THE OECS YOUTH DEVELOPMENT AGENDA- EMPOWERMENT FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

A PAPER PRESENTED BY HENRY CHARLES REGIONAL DIRECTOR OF THE COMMONWEALTH YOUTH PROGRAMME CARIBBEAN CENTRE AT A CONFERENCE ON “YOUTH, CRIME AND VIOLENCE” HOSTED BY THE ORGANIZATION OF EASTERN CARIBBEAN STATES IN SAINT LUCIA 9-12 OCTOBER 2006.

Preamble

I must admit upon receipt of the correspondence inviting the Commonwealth Youth Programme to participate in this conference I had some misgivings about the theme “Youth, crime and violence.”

These misgivings did not originate from any diminished perception of the significant contribution the Organization of Eastern Caribbean States has and continues to make towards the sustainable development of the member territories.

Instead the influencing factor was my own wariness with the apparent pervasive tendency on the part of too many policy makers to treat young people as problems to be addressed.

However notwithstanding my initial trepidation the decision to support and participate in this process is based on two important principles.

First it is historically important that yet another credible regional development agency has recognized the significance of becoming a partner in the regional youth development agenda. Secondly the conference itself allows a critical opportunity for sharing of ideas and grinding out strategies to help transform the regional youth development landscape.

Methodology

I must warn the thrust of this paper does not strictly conform to guidelines provided for submission of conference papers. It is not an academic analysis of any of the issues related to ‘Youth, crime and violence.’”

The main thrust of the paper is to highlight the inadequacy of prevailing youth development policies and strategies and propose a paradigm shift.

This approach is anchored by the firm belief that a paradigm shift in the youth development strategy and agenda is urgently necessary if we are to address the many youth development challenges including that of youth, crime and violence.

Introduction

Within recent times there is growing panic among the citizenry regarding the negative manifestations of youth socialization and development. Throughout the Caribbean the widely held view among many commentators is that we seem to be facing a virtual crisis in youth development. Such concerns and opinions have dominated national and regional conferences and meetings, newspaper columns, the various 'TALK SHOWS' and other popular media. Let us juxtapose this against the virtual panic in the United States in the 1980s, when prophets of doom predicted that there would be a "blood bath across the US" with youth crime being unstoppable. Of course history has proven otherwise and statistics bore out a drastic reduction in crime in the 1990s and early 2000. There were several cogent reasons for this that you can research.

Then and now Governments are under increasing pressure to formulate and implement effective strategies to manage this perceived crisis.

The youth development landscape

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

The prevailing economic, social and political ethos, as well as encroaching cultural influences in most regions have conspired to undermine the capacity of the state to perform its role as a medium to facilitate economic and social justice. They have also in many instances diminished the prevalence of traditional modes of socialization and indeed the once sobering influence of institutions such as the family, church, schools and of most 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 Caribbean have successfully managed the challenges posed by this new ethos. It is not usually front page news but many young people continue to make significant contributions to the development of their communities and societies.

However, there must be concern that disturbingly significant numbers of young people are increasingly becoming the victims of social injustice, social exclusion, economic marginalization and political theatrics.

It is now well established that this prevailing socio-economic and, socio-political ethos is primarily responsible for the escalating youth poverty and unemployment and indeed other social and political challenges such as the alarming prevalence of HIV and AIDS among young people, youth violence and crime, drug abuse and drug trafficking among the many other social challenges, which threaten to destroy the very fabric of our societies.

Consequently despite the glowing success of many young people as alluded to previously the Caribbean youth development landscape is replete with manifestations of:

- Increasing hopelessness among many young persons.
- Increasing engagement of significant numbers of youth in risky behaviors.
- Increasing apathy and disinterest in issues related to personal, family and national development.
- An apparent disinterest in traditional civic and community based activities.
- Disproportionate trends of poverty among urban youth as a percentage of the employable population, and the related increasing poverty of rural youth affected by the failure of traditional rural-based sources of livelihood.
- Disturbing trends of disrespect and disregard for symbols of authority and officialdom.
- Reported underachievement and escalating social exclusion of young males.

- Adoption of non-traditional and often controversial modes of advocacy on issues of concern.
- Increasing impatience with and distrust of established procedures, bureaucratic systems and structures.
- Increasing involvement of young persons in socially deviant behaviors.

There are those who argue that many of these challenges are either the consequence of the pervasive influence of popular and often non-indigenous sub-cultures and norms that are socially degrading and or that these serve to exacerbate the problem.

Another very disturbing trend is the efficiency of criminal organizations, fundamentalists, and social and political deviants in varying incarnations who occupy the space created by the declining influence of the comatose guardians of our social justice, social order and civic responsibility.

GOVERNMENT'S SOCIAL- WELFARIST RESPONSE

Faced with such overwhelming challenges Caribbean Governments have to large extent switched to panic mode. Most governments if not all have demonstrated some measure of concern for, at least the negative manifestations of these youth development challenges.

However, with very few exceptions their response to the youth development challenges remains very much social-welfarist in nature. This social welfarist approach to youth development is characterized by the following.

- Youth Development Agencies and structures created to implement and manage the youth development agenda are inadequately funded and accorded very little importance in Ministerial hierarchy. Very often it is only the sheer commitment and dedication of youth development workers which prevents the total irrelevance and collapse of the youth development architecture.

- The majority of youth development initiatives and activities are not informed by empirical data and fact but rather by myth and stereotyping.
- 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 quick-fix youth enterprise programmes and diverse models and concepts of youth employment schemes have been implemented. Unfortunately many of these remain under funded and inadequately aligned to broader economic recovery or development strategy. The problem is further compounded by the absence of credible mechanisms to facilitate proper evaluation of the impact of these initiatives on the lives of the most vulnerable and marginalized of youth. How then do we determine whether these are just feel good projects or whether they have any significant impact on youth unemployment and economic empowerment?
- Convening of Youth Parliaments is a very commendable initiative. However there is little evidence to suggest that the

issues debated by the young parliamentarians inform or influence national development agendas.

- Most countries have adopted various models of youth participation, including but not limited to appointment of youth representatives on boards and various committees. However the optimum impact of these initiatives are usually devalued by the fluctuating dispositions of governments and often the disproportionate influence of more powerful social groups, and the lack of an effective policy and legislative framework to support meaningful youth participation.
- 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 youth support and active participation around the various themes.
- 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 nor are they treated as an integral component of the education system.

- Official reports confirm increased expenditure in law enforcement and penal services. Yet there is crying need for reform of the penal and juvenile justice systems.
- Ironically while many governments may have increased investment in sporting infrastructure, there still is a conspicuous absence of comprehensive sustainable sporting and healthy lifestyles programmes.
- A plethora of HIV and AIDS awareness programmes exist in the Caribbean. Yet many of these programmes are inadequately youth driven and asset- based in approach.
- Partnerships among youth development stakeholders are in the main ad hoc rather strategic in nature.
- There is a lack of strategic awareness and related urgency to support and promote the professionalization of youth development work.
- An uncanny tendency to hastily adopt some youth development strategies and concepts which have little or no relevance to our cultural heritage.

Consequently whereas at the micro level there maybe some activity based 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 agencies have crafted and employed various evaluation tools and mechanisms to measure the impact of existing youth development strategies, in the main their application remains non-existent. This may very well be one of the reasons why the prevailing youth development strategy framework is overpopulated with ‘feel good’ activities, initiatives and projects which have little or no profound impact on the Commonwealth youth development landscape.

In the circumstances it would appear unless there is a paradigm shift in the youth development strategy the pursuit of economic empowerment, social justice and sustainable development will remain an “**espwa mal papyi**”. In the words of Haile Selasie it will remain “***a fleeting illusion- to be pursued but never attained.***”

THE WAY FORWARD – FROM SOCIAL WELFARIST TO TRANSFORMATIONAL MODEL.

The vision

“Prosperous societies populated by a citizenry co-existing in a climate of peace, social cohesion, economic viability, social justice and empowered to pursue self actualization and sustainable development; conscious of their cultural heritage and identity.”

The way forward

Given the complexities of youth development in the Caribbean conjoined with the inability of the existing social welfarist model to produce sustainable development outcomes, there is a compelling case for a paradigm shift in the youth development strategy framework and architecture.

Governments, development agencies and youth networks must bite the bullet and proceed to abandon their social –welfarist posture and adopt a transformational approach to youth development.

The Transformational model- characteristics and possibilities

The character of this transformational approach will be presented from two different but intrinsically linked perspectives. First there is the macro perspective which establishes the broad philosophical outlook and then at the micro level are the more specific programmes and initiatives which seek to operationalize the philosophical principles.

MACRO PERSPECTIVE

First, the transformational model demands an evidence- based approach to youth development work. The idea of youth development strategies being informed mainly by myths, emotions and stereotyping must be abandoned. These strategies should instead be based upon empirical data and fact. A good place for us to start would be to have a better handle on our Caribbean youth demographics – how many young women are heads of households without jobs; what is the youth rural base that is marginalized by failing agriculture, and so on?

Secondly a Rights- based approach to youth development must be adopted. Policy makers must disabuse their minds of the idea that young people are problems to be addressed and embrace the fact that they like any other citizen have a right to sustainable livelihoods; they have a right to advocate their needs, desires, fears and opinions; and they must be accorded appropriate and adequate opportunities to fulfill their needs, aspirations and desire for self actualization.

Governments and youth development agencies and indeed youth networks must adopt a strategic approach to youth development. This requires the formulation of a Strategic Youth Development Plan (SYDP) formulated on the basis of a broad based, democratic, consultative process. This SYDP must include a clear vision, definable and attainable goals and objectives, precise outcomes and performance indicators and credible evaluation strategies. The vision and goals of this strategic plan must be aligned to the broader national development goals and clearly articulate a youth-mainstreaming approach in its design and operationalization. It must therefore, have built-in the implementation mechanisms that are appropriate to ensure the policies are transformed into action using

young people themselves are key implementing agents in this process, as advocates for empowerment and as evaluators of outcomes.

Governments and their youth development partners must be committed to developing strategic and sustainable partnerships built upon mutual trust, respect and understanding for each others role and responsibility. Further every effort must be made to engage non-traditional partners such as the media, trade unions, credit unions and cultural development agencies.

I want to spend a few minutes exploring the role of the media in this paradigm shift. Sensationalism sells! This probably explains why we have seen a disproportionate amount of negative reporting and stereotyping relating to youth. The media should be impartial but they are not distant observers of social development. They have a part to play. I would like to see some more responsible investigative journalism celebrating youth achievements. Furthermore, I want to challenge the regional media to embrace a wider social agenda whereby they engage community youth in broadcasting, journalism

and media work in order to channel positive energies and social consciousness towards nation-building. Let's start seeing community youth pilots where the media becomes a positive force in youth empowerment, not only in 'sensationalising' crime.

While due consideration must be given to the financial and budgetary constraints facing Caribbean governments, our youth development budgets must not be perceived as yet another line item but must be treated as an investment in our countries' sustainable development. Further, notwithstanding the dictates of international financial institutions governments must remain firmly committed to their moral responsibility to provide the enabling environment for youth empowerment. It is a clear and present moral responsibility that cannot be abdicated.

But perhaps the most important consideration is for our youth development strategies to be anchored in the context of who we really are as a Caribbean people – using the pertinent features of our cultural heritage and identity and imbued with the requisite spiritually uplifting ethos.

MICRO PERSPECTIVE

Governments should consider the following:

- ✓ Engage in a process of reforming and re-positioning youth development Ministries and agencies to enhance efficiency and effectiveness. Timeliness and relevance must become the bedrock of service delivery.
- ✓ In this regard it may also be appropriate to consider the suitability and capacity of Civil Service structures to efficiently and effectively deliver quality youth development services. Consideration should be given to the formation of autonomous para-statal bodies or joint venture entities to function as executing agencies for strategic youth development plans.

- ✓ As already established, there is in the main a dearth of credible research on emerging trends of youth poverty, youth socialization and behavior. Therefore as part of the reform process consideration must be given to developing and enhancing the research capacity of Ministries, departments and youth development agencies. This will facilitate the documentation and presentation of credible data and analyses which should serve to enhance the policy formulation environment.

- ✓ Many of the traditional tools of intervention are becoming less and less effective. It is therefore necessary to consider, develop, adopt and implement new and more effective tools of intervention. Here the use of popular education and communication techniques and social marketing should be given due consideration.

- ✓ There is also an urgent need to adopt effective evaluation tools and mechanisms to assess and measure the impact and

relevance of approved programmes and initiatives. This will assist in ensuring more efficient use of scarce resources and greater accountability.

- ✓ There is little evidence that the various youth entrepreneurship and employment programmes as they are presently configured will achieve any sustainable and profound impact on youth unemployment and satisfy youth desires for economic empowerment and self actualization. It is therefore imperative that a more comprehensive and mainstreaming approach be adopted in the formulation and execution of these initiatives. Such programmes must of necessity reflect a capacity to navigate emerging global economic arrangements while at the same time providing adequate opportunities for youth entrepreneurs to progress from micro to mainstream enterprises and industries. It is also extremely important to explore and exploit the opportunities provided by the rich cultural heritage of our countries.

- ✓ The existing avenues and mechanisms to ensure and facilitate youth participation are mainly ad-hoc and tokenistic in nature. Therefore appropriate legislation and policies must be adopted to ensure that youths are adequately empowered to participate as equals in the various decision and policy making forums and organs of the state.

- ✓ Too much of the vital youth resource is squandered in the abyss of existing penal and juvenile justice systems. Consequently the issue of penal and juvenile justice reform must be made a priority of our youth development strategy. In this regard governments should give due consideration to the World Bank's recommendation to establish "Second Chance" programmes for young people. Further there is an urgent need to invest more and better quality resources towards the establishment of effective social rehabilitation programmes.

- ✓ Stereotyping the victims of social exclusion fuels social instability and must be abandoned. Instead we must engage these young people in dialogue to formulate and implement

programmes which will help reintegrate them into the main stream of society.

- ✓ Despite perceptions about our relative technologically underdeveloped status in the Caribbean, the emerging ICT environment must not be treated as a passing trend. This is a useful opportunity to advance sustainable development. Consequently there is need for a comprehensive policy and urgent action to expedite the access to ICT for expanding educational and business opportunities for youth and to increase space for advocacy and information exchange which can contribute in no small measure to further advancing our fledgling democracies. Our youth must be empowered to become developers, producers and suppliers of ICT products and services of globally acceptable standards.

Youth Networks should themselves consider the following:

- ✓ These are in the main ineffective, inefficiently managed and unattractive to significant numbers of youth at risk. This has served to undermine their ability to remain as effective

advocates and representatives of the majority of young people. Consequently there is an urgent need to engage in a process of capacity building and re-positioning. In this regard opportunities must be provided to youth leaders to acquire new and cutting edge leadership and management skills and competencies.

- ✓ As indicated above in many countries the majority of youth are indifferent to the existence and functioning of youth networks. Consequently there is an urgent need for these networks to engage in a comprehensive mobilization and recruitment programme. Beyond this these youth networks must ensure there is adequate transparency and participation in their policy and decision making process to ensure sustainable youth participation.
- ✓ These networks need to also engage in a process of identifying adequate sources of sustainable funding for administrative and programming functions.

Conclusion

The proposals presented in this paper do not in any way represent an exhaustive list of initiatives and strategies. However I am convinced

that the proposed transformational model of youth development provides a credible framework to effectively transform the youth development landscape and create an enabling environment for the sustainable development.

Finally I wish to re affirm the thirty plus year old commitment of the Commonwealth Youth Programme's Caribbean Centre to work in partnership with existing and emerging youth development stakeholders towards a more progressive youth development ethos in particular and the sustainable development of member territories in general.

We can either allow our societies to disintegrate into laboratories of hopelessness, despair and social instability or help transform them into cradles of creativity, social cohesion and economic prosperity.

The choice is ours!!