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National Youth Policy and National Youth Service

Towards concerted action

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SUMMARY The focus of this chapter is on youth, and on the importance of national youth policy (NYP) and national youth service (NYS) from a global perspective. The terms 'national youth policy' and 'national youth service' are explained and set within the context of larger socio-economic strategies and much larger programmes of social and human services in society.

Through the experiences of the member states of the United Nations, the chapter explores some of the difficulties encountered in effective implementation of national youth policy, and goes on to argue that youth policy and youth service need to be co-ordinated and integrated for maximum impact and benefit to young people and society as a whole.

The chapter offers some 'good practice' steps to achieve this kind of co-ordination and describes the work of the International Council on National Youth Policy, with its focus on achieving co-ordinated action. Finally, a select bibliography of the work of the United Nations in the areas of national youth policy and national youth service is presented in the form of a timeline from 1995 to 2001.

Introduction

The focus of this chapter is on youth, and on the importance of national youth policy (NYP) and national youth service (NYS) from a global perspective. The United Nations General Assembly has defined 'youth' as those persons aged 15 to 24 years, a definition first agreed to in adopting the Guidelines for the United Nations International Youth Year (1985) and reiterated in the World Programme of Action for Youth of 1995.¹ As early as 1968, the UN defined the concepts of both a national youth policy and national youth service, based on the mandates of the General Assembly (United Nations/International Labour Organisation 1968). The formulation and adoption of these definitions have been part of a process of recognising, at an international level, the special needs and interests of youth in all societies.

National youth policy

A national youth policy is understood as a policy adopted by governments in co-operation with non-governmental youth organisations that:

- clearly defines the place and role of youth in society and the responsibility of society to youth,
- considers the needs, problems and aspirations of youth of the present and for the future,
- promotes the establishment of appropriate services and structures to meet the needs and aspirations of youth by, for and with youth, and
- encourages youth to participate actively in the life of society and in its decision-making processes.

There is no prescriptive formula for what the concept, structure or content of a national youth policy should be. Each nation must determine such matters based on its socio-cultural heritage and on the views of all stakeholders. However, national youth policies adopted by member states of the UN since 1985, have normally included statements of purpose and rationale, a definition of youth, historical and contemporary issues affecting young people, vision, policy goals and objectives, rights and responsibilities, priority issues, target groups, key strategies and an action plan. The action plan indicates the steps and mechanisms to implement the policy, and would normally include an evaluation of such activities.

National youth service

Ideally, national youth service is conceived of as part of the implementation or enactment of national youth policy. Within the context of action plans, therefore, national youth service has been thought of as:

- offering opportunities for young people to serve society as well as to participate in practical actions so as to implement the national youth policy at local and provincial levels,
- providing young people with opportunities to acquire skills in order to become productive members of their society, and
- enabling young people to be active participants in their own development as well as become responsible citizens of the country.

Participants in national youth service normally serve full-time for a period of six months to two years and receive sufficient support to enable them to serve – whether from NGOs or governments. In some cases participants are involved in part-time youth service. Major areas of youth service include health, education, employment and vocational training, environmental conservation, public works, and care for the aging and children.

The concept of a national youth service also includes service-learning where students use their education to serve others. Service-learning is a graduation requirement in many universities around the world. In secondary schools and universities, it is often a prelude to full-time youth service work.

It must be remembered, however, that national youth service is a small sub-set of a much larger framework of programmes of human service in society. And similarly, national youth policy is a small sub-set of the much larger body of socio-economic policies in society. These larger policy and service frameworks are concerned with various population groups in society including: children, adolescents, young people, the ageing, women, men, migrant workers, disabled persons, etc., and with major cross-sectoral themes such as participation, development and peace.

The account given in this chapter of youth policies and service practice is based on the mandates and experiences of the United Nations and its 191 member states as well as of the non-governmental youth organisations and youth-related intergovernmental organisations affiliated to the UN. In examining these experiences and analysing the need for youth policies and service, it attempts to describe the progress achieved and obstacles encountered. In particular, it argues for the necessity of well co-ordinated and integrated policy and service practice to achieve maximum impact, and with that goal in mind, outlines some of the elements of 'best practice' in the field.

Progress achieved and obstacles encountered

The United Nations reported in 2001 that of its 191 member states, approximately 155 had various types of national youth policies and, yet, only about 116 had national programmes of action, which in some countries included national youth service (United Nations 2001). Based on the work of the UN Youth Unit, it is estimated that at least half of existing national youth policies are not sufficiently cross-sectoral in concept and management and do not involve inter-ministerial committees on youth, national youth councils, or national youth service. And of the approximately 50-70 members of the United Nations that have national youth services, about half of those are not connected to the national youth policy, if indeed there is a youth policy in the country concerned.

For example, in the course of UN advisory service missions in November and December 2002, representatives of the governments of Kenya and Jordan were presented with the idea of linking their national youth policies to national youth service in an action plan. Their response was not favourable. In Kenya, this was because of government manipulation (since 1964, the national youth service has been located in the Office of the President of Kenya and used for political purposes). In Jordan, the national youth service was used for some development efforts, but this was not sustained. The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in Jordan has proposed a new Jordanian National Youth Corps as part of the government's national youth policy, but plans are still in an early stage. In South Africa, a new national youth service was approved by Parliament in 1996 as part of a national youth policy, but no funds were allocated to firmly establish the service, and only pilot projects have been undertaken since then.

In some countries, both the national youth policy and national youth service have been manipulated by governments for political purposes and have not been firmly grounded on partnerships between relevant youth organisations and government at national, provincial and local levels. In those circumstances, both policy and service have fallen victim to political machinations. An additional problem is that people concerned with youth policy and those concerned with service are often located in different government ministries and have quite different points of emphasis and reference. Finding common ground between them is not always easy.

Common problems encountered in many countries include:

- Inadequate political will, visionary leadership, and legislative and policy direction to deal with national youth policy and service and to mainstream them into national development plans;
- Lack of a conceptual framework to link the national youth policy and national youth service at all levels;
- Low levels of funding that are not always sustained;

- Inadequate participation of stakeholders, especially youth;
- Insufficient training of personnel and capacity-building of youth NGOs;
- Withdrawal of support of government after an election and accession to power of a new political party;
- Insufficient coverage and outreach;
- Lack of time-bound action plans to implement both policy and service; and
- Political manipulation by government, and little space for a youth partnership.

The separation between youth policy and youth service extends to international and regional forums as well. At both international and regional levels, there are two separate systems of conferences that have evolved over the past 15 years. One has a focus on policy (for governmental ministers responsible for youth), and the other is of a programmatic nature focusing on national youth service (for practitioners and heads of national youth service schemes). The problem has often been that neither of these sets of meetings discuss the substantive links that ought to exist between national youth policy and national youth service and how the two can work together more effectively to the benefit of youth and society.

At the international level, the International Council on National Youth Policy (ICNYP) is organising an International Conference on National Youth Policy as well as a series of regional training seminars on youth policy. The International Association for National Youth Service (IANYS) convenes a Global Conference on National Youth Service on a biennial basis and is beginning to hold regional meetings on youth service. But there has not been much co-ordination between those two processes.

At a regional level, there are meetings of ministers responsible for youth in each of the five United Nations regions (Africa, Asia and Pacific, Europe, Latin America and the Caribbean and Western Asia) which discuss national youth policy, but there are no corresponding regional ministerial meetings on national youth service.

Finding solutions: Partnership and co-ordination

There is an urgent need for much stronger co-ordination between national youth policy and national youth service in order to achieve maximum impact and benefit to young people and to society. Theory and practice are normally prerequisites for a successful strategy in many fields, including those concerning youth. National youth policy will remain only a theory on paper unless adequate measures are taken to implement it by all stakeholders, and unless it is allocated sufficient and sustained public and private sector funding.

A powerful rationale can be presented for seeing national youth service as one of the practical ways of implementing national youth policy. National youth service makes an important economic, social, and political contribution to society; it has increasingly been seen as an essential element of good governance and development, and as a major way for responsible citizens to contribute to development. It also helps to integrate into society young people who have been excluded or marginalised, and has a role to play in promoting full employment by enhancing the employability of unemployed youth.

And there are important roles for governments to play in promoting youth service within a national youth policy. These include:

- Promoting volunteering within the educational and youth services for civic engagement as part of life-skills and technical capacity-building;
- Developing specific programmes to encourage youth volunteering at national, provincial and local levels;
- Developing systems to recognise and accredit volunteering by youth,
- Working with the media and other stakeholders to present a more attractive up-to-date image of youth volunteering; and
- Funding the infrastructure of the youth volunteers, in partnership with other stakeholders (i.e., including the private sector, universities, etc.) and ensuring that the requisite legal and fiscal framework is in place.

Experience gained since the International Youth Year of 1985 suggests that combined national youth policy/youth service action plans are best undertaken on a partnership basis between the government ministry responsible for youth and young people and youth organisations. They should be based on a comprehensive survey of the situation of youth in all parts of the country (rural and urban areas) and analysed on an inter-sectoral basis to identify both the problems and the most appropriate forms of intervention to improve the situation of youth. They should also be planned, implemented, evaluated and re-directed by, for and with young people.

There has been a tendency among policy makers in all fields (including youth policy) to deal with such matters in isolation from practical action such as community service. And, likewise, there has been a tendency among practitioners in all fields (including youth service) to deal with such matters in isolation from policy development and implementation. There should be a stronger partnership between such policy and service programmes and, within those larger frameworks, between those concerned with national youth policy and national youth service.

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Steps towards co-ordinated action

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While there is no single, universal model for a successful national youth policy and national youth service, there are some indicators of good practice based on the mandates of the United Nations General Assembly and the experiences of UN member states, especially since the International Youth Year of 1985. The following elements of an action plan are not meant to be either prescriptive or completely exhaustive. Each nation must determine such matters based on its own socio-cultural heritage, its political and economic priorities, and the views of all stakeholders. What is more, national youth policy and national youth service should themselves be better integrated into the larger frameworks of socio-economic policy and human service for national development and international co-operation.

Concerted action could include the following elements:

Developing a vision of, by and for youth for the present and future: Such a vision would concern all stakeholders linked directly to both formal and non-formal education (governmental youth-related ministries, youth and youth-related organisations, the private sector, UN and bilateral development agencies, etc.). The vision of youth should be seen as a vibrant resource, indeed a solution, and not only as a problem for society.

Defining the youth age group and its sub-groups: The United Nations General Assembly recommended for International Youth Year in 1985 and again in 1995 for the World Programme of Action on Youth that 'youth' were those persons aged 15 to 24 years. That definition was arrived at for statistical purposes, while recognising that many member states have other definitions, and the Assembly noted such sub-groups as urban youth, rural youth, girls and young women, students, young workers, disabled youth, refugee and migrant youth, etc.

Establishing a youth database, information and communication: This involves providing base-line data and profiles of youth throughout the country, and possibly presenting a communication strategy for more positive media images of young people. An information and communications technology strategy could be developed promoting more youth access to the Internet, youth development and civic engagement.

Conducting research on the situation of youth, including hearings and attitude surveys: National youth policy should be grounded on this kind of information and updated on a regular and cross-sectoral basis. Ongoing research should be used to identify a set of priority issues (youth education, employment, health, poverty, hunger, environment, drug abuse, juvenile delinquency, etc.), establish targets, and formulate strategies for improving the situation of youth in specific and measurable ways.

Improving youth participation in democratic reform and governance: Youth participation should be encouraged in decision-making processes and institutions, advisory bodies and the promotion of responsible citizenship for young people. In particular this could include freedom of association, speech, assembly and related human rights, such as election of officers by youth to student councils at schools and universities, as well as to executive committees of youth NGOs. Enhanced civic engagement roles for youth and their youth organisations would enable them to contribute directly to the democratic reform and governance of society.

Supporting youth as agents for innovation and change in society: This would include support of the creative and innovative work of young people in cultural, social, economic, political and legal processes and institutions, as well as the promotion of young people as consumers and creators of cultural heritage.

Training and building the capacity of youth workers: The aim here would be to strengthen youth leadership abilities and skills, as well as enhance their opportunities and cultivate ways of supporting the development of the national youth policy and its implementation.

Instituting national youth service: This could be on a voluntary and/or mandatory basis for making an economic contribution to society, for responsible citizenship, good governance and development, for the integration of young people into society, and for the promotion of full employment by enhancing the employability of unemployed youth.

Recognising youth policy and youth service achievements through awards: Awards could be given by the head of state or other appropriate representatives of the government to young people who have made outstanding national youth service contributions to society. The government could further recognise such youth service by accrediting volunteering by youth in the educational system and providing service-learning courses in schools and universities as well as in vocational training centres.

Co-ordinating youth policy and programmes: Better promotion and implementation of the national youth policy and national youth service could be achieved by establishing co-ordination bodies for governmental ministries and departments (inter-ministerial co-ordinating committee), for youth and youth-related organisations (national youth NGO co-ordinating council), and in the private sector (business council on youth). UN programmes and agencies as well as bilateral development agencies could be brought together in some kind of joint body such as the UN Development Assistance Framework (UNDAF) Youth Theme Group.

Enacting youth legislation and follow-up: This refers to the drafting and submission of a national youth policy and youth service bill to the cabinet or ministerial council for enactment in Parliament. The draft bill would normally include a specific

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programme budget and operational plan with the establishment of a Parliamentary body (as a committee or sub-committee) to oversee its implementation, and to institute reviews, amendments, or new bills to supplement the national youth policy process.

Establishing a youth budget and fund: The purpose here is to finance the promotion, implementation, evaluation and re-direction of a national youth policy and national youth service as part of the 'youth' bill of Parliament. This could take the form of a biennial programme budget, a medium-term plan for a four year period, and include programme performance indicators, a review of the costs and benefits of investing in youth compared with other priorities, phased time-frames, and a regular audit. Youth philanthropy should be encouraged through the participation of young people in the management of budget allocations, fundraising and selection of awardees.

Drawing up a youth policy outreach action plan: All of the elements of a national youth policy/national youth service action plan should be included in the project document containing the national youth policy. It should outline the multi-level programme of action planned at national, provincial and local levels to implement the policy in phased steps and with specific time frames by, for and with youth and their organisations, as well as on inter-generational and inter-cultural bases.

Evaluating and re-directing youth policy: A regular meeting of the stakeholders (such as a national youth commission) should undertake short, medium and long-term evaluations of the impact of the national youth policy/national youth service. Performance indicators should be developed for each output of the policy, an annual audit conducted on the progress achieved and obstacles encountered, and re-direction instituted based on the results of the evaluation.

Sharing experiences and best practices on national youth policy: The government should share experiences with other governments at the sub-regional, regional and global levels, by participating in the respective meetings of ministers responsible for youth and expert group meetings related to youth policies and youth services. Youth NGO representatives should be included in the delegations to such meetings, and the internal policies and practices should likewise promote international co-operation among youth as well as among youth organisations on a sub-regional, regional and global basis to share experiences and encourage understanding, mutual respect and peace.

Linking international and regional levels, and conferences: There should be concerted action to better link the two separate systems of international and regional conferences on youth policy and service which have evolved over the past 15 years. This would involve action to place on the agendas of each of those meetings an item on the need for concerted action to link the youth policy and youth service by, for and with youth NGOs, and for the follow-up provision of advisory services and training workshops for the sharing of experiences and capacity-building.

The work of the International Council on National Youth Policy

To promote such concerted action, the International Council on National Youth Policy (ICNYP) was established on 18 January 2002 as a joint non-governmental / inter-governmental expert body in Vienna, Austria. It is registered as a legal entity with the Austrian Ministry of Interior for the following purposes:

- To encourage and enable all stakeholders, and most particularly youth, to participate in all aspects of formulating, implementing and evaluating national youth policy;
- To:
 - identify the priority problems facing youth and society,
 - prepare proposals for solving those problems with the full participation of young people and their formal and informal structures,
 - adopt coherent sets of such proposals,
 - promote their implementation, and
 - undertake their assessment (short and medium-term monitoring and consequent adjustment of programmes en route) and periodic longer-term evaluation and modification;
- To exchange global information and research on national youth policy, promote the actual use of existing such material, support new global studies of an intersectoral nature on national youth policy and set up a resource bank on national youth policy concerning global, regional and bilateral funding sources willing and able to finance national youth policy projects;
- To formulate policy and programme initiatives to strengthen national youth policy and the capacity of governments, youth NGOs and CBOs (community-based organisations) to adopt, implement and evaluate such policies;
- To stress the linkage of national youth policy, on the one hand, and national youth service and different forms of youth volunteering, on the other, in this overall process; and
- To enhance co-ordination and networking of policy and programme experts in national youth policy (among governments, inter-governmental organisations, NGOs, and UN agencies).

The ICNYP has agreed to include in all of its plans, meetings and advisory services items related to the relationship between national youth policy and national youth service. In that regard, the ICNYP has recently formed a partnership with the UNDP and signed a memorandum of co-operation with the UNDP United Nations Volunteers (UNV) for a series of advisory service missions and training seminars in each UN region and to convene international expert meetings. The first ICNYP advisory service missions began in 2002 in all UN regions, and the first regional training seminar for Central and East Africa will be held in co-operation with UNDP in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia from 24-26 September 2003. The first International Conference on National Youth Policy is being planned for May 2004 in Vienna, Austria.

The ICNYP is working together with a number of other organisations to promote this concerted youth policy and youth service action, and this involves co-operation with the inter-governmental organisations which convene regional meetings of ministers responsible for youth such as the Commonwealth Youth Programme (CYP), the Conference of Francophone Ministers of Youth and Sports (CONFEJES), the Conference of Portuguese-speaking Community of Ministers of Youth (CPLP/CMJ), the Arab Council of Ministers of Youth and Sports (ACMYS), the Ibero-American Youth Minister Conference (OIJ), the Council of Europe Conference of Ministers of Youth (COE/CMY), the European Union Conference on Ministers of Youth (EU/CMY), the ASEAN Senior Officials Meeting on Youth (ASEAN/SOMY), the CARICOM Meeting of Directors of Youth and Sports (CARICOM/MDYS), and so on. In each case, an attempt will be made to place national youth policy and national youth service concerns on the respective agendas and follow-up plans in each region. Partnership arrangements are also being made with youth NGOs to promote this action.

Conclusion

The programme of the International Council on National Youth Policy is one attempt to achieve greater co-ordination and integration of national youth policy and national youth service, seen as essential to making a significant impact on the situation of youth. To improve the life chances of youth and to enhance the participation of youth in the life of society and in decision-making processes, it is clear, however, that much more needs to be done in terms of concerted action.

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Note

¹ These age parameters were adopted for statistical purposes, and from 1985, all major statistical yearbooks of the UN system have used that definition for collecting and presenting statistics on youth (demographic, education, employment and health). Prior to 1985, such UN statistics did not include classifications by that age group.