

This Report's simple message to governments and policy makers is that investing in young people is essential for development—and for those investments to be most effective, young people must be included as stakeholders in decisions that affect them. But what can young people do? This spotlight addresses young people directly about how to develop their own capabilities so they can seize the opportunities provided to them, but especially, so they can create opportunities for themselves, for other young people, and for everyone. The spotlight benefited greatly from consultations with youth from many countries who have successfully taken action for development. It was written by young people, for young people.

Young people make a difference

*People will decide their lives
People will identify their problems
People will lead to self-help
People will share the fruits*

This is the motto of Chamila, Kamili, Wacheeri, and Milmini—four young women from villages in Sri Lanka who are helping young people and all people in their villages overcome poverty. Kamili (age 22) says, “Our problems are village problems, and the village’s problems are ours.” They have seen resources wasted and misguided projects implemented by those trying to help their villages, but instead of becoming disillusioned with development work they became engaged in it. They sum up their work as “Strengthen the village by increasing your individual capacity.”

Powerful older villagers haven’t always appreciated their involvement: when Chamila (age 19) was elected to the village council, it would not allow her to take office because of her youth. But the community, remembering her past hard work and cooperation while volunteering on village projects, forced the whole council to resign instead. Chamila was then reinstated with a new council.

These four women are just a few of the hundreds of poor young people (ages 16–25) who are volunteering and working together for community development in Sri Lanka.

Source: Interview with Samantha M. Constant and Sarath K. Guttikunda. Social Accountability Workshop. Gemi Diriya Project, Sri Lanka. March 2006.

This Report recommends that governments should invest in and recognize young people. For it to become reality, young people must seize the initiative and invest—by developing your own capacity, and taking action to make youth investments successful. And as young people in Sri Lanka recognize, (see the box above), all meaningful investments in development can positively affect young people. What can be done and how to do it?

Take action: What can be done

No matter who you are, you can take action as young people to make life better for yourself, and at the same time, for others around you. Some of the poorest boys and girls (ages 12–15) in Malawi and Nepal, for example, have formed sanitation clubs—sometimes in spite of ridicule from their peers—to build latrines and maintain water pumps for their schools, improving their daily experience and the health of their communities.

The many things young people have accomplished fill books and reports,¹ and there are few limitations on the ways young people can contribute to development.

Action can be as simple as developing one’s own capabilities—learning about and taking advantage of a training program, a health service, career options—or finding out about and discussing with friends an issue that matters to them (the environment, HIV/AIDS). What you decide to do and how you do it will depend on your skills, your personality, the issues that inspire you, the resources you have available to you, and the circumstances in which you live.

Working with the system

Few societies readily include young people in policy decisions (chapters 7 and 9), but many young people overcome that challenge to volunteer or work for existing NGOs, or cooperate with governments to improve policies. Through youth service organizations in countries such as Kenya, Pakistan, and the Philippines, youth have developed and carried out active solutions to community and national problems. In Mexico 2,000 young people volunteer to improve literacy and civic participation through one of many large programs that involve young people. Young people have a key role in exercising their “client power” to

hold governments accountable—as young people have done in Brazil (see box 2.4), FYR Macedonia, and Russia (chapter 3). And “government” can be anything from a local teacher to a global institution.

Going beyond the system

Many young people decide to start something new, be it an activist campaign for social justice or a motorbike transport business (chapter 7). These youth-led projects usually work best when young people work together, and train the next “next generation” to continue their efforts. Students at one college in the United States started the first student-run think tank in 2004, and already, students at 50 other colleges have joined the network, and lawmakers have begun to use their research.

Young people face many challenges, but every challenge to taking action is an opportunity to take action. Most young people see a lack of jobs as just a challenge to employment. Several large groups of young ex-combatants in Sierra Leone took it as an opportunity and joined together across opposing sides of the conflict to start a motorbike transportation business. By starting a new trade (motorbike transportation did not exist before the war), they avoided the challenges faced by youth breaking into established trades and instead were very successful. Plus, they found a job that they particularly enjoy as young people. As one bike rider (age 18) says, “The war was exciting, but bad. To be a bike rider is exciting and good.” Still they had to work to gain the trust of clients, and learn to cooperate with the traditional system: rather than reacting violently to perceived unfair treatment by police, they hired a lawyer.²

Tools for action: How to get it done

Young people often face complex challenges, such as lack of information and experience, skeptical and resistant authorities, bureaucracies that favor qualifications over hard work and skills, lack of resources, and lack of recognition for their work. Despite these

obstacles, young people can still take action to develop their capability—through persistence, a willingness to experiment, and four basic tools.

Learn

Find out as much you can about how to build skills for your work and your life, about both sides of development issues you are passionate about, about different ways of taking action.

One youth UN delegate from the Netherlands, spent “half a year” lobbying his government to participate in the Millennium Summit, and relied on his expertise on the issues to convince them to allow him to go:

After a certain time they knew me, they knew that I wasn't just smiling and representing the youth, but also, I could really help them with experts on different youth issues. What I know a lot about because of my work at the Red Cross is HIV/AIDS. But if they wanted to talk with child soldiers, I could help them. . . .³

How can this be done?

- “Use the power of ICTs to get information,” writes a young volunteer in Nigeria (chapter 8). To start, learn from Web sites such as the Development Gateway, the UN, and the World Bank, and the many sites for specific issues and national organizations.*
- Take advantage of programs that provide information to young people, such as Umsobomvu Youth Fund in South Africa, or those that provide information about services for young people (education, jobs), such as the ASER project in India (chapter 3).*
- Learn how to apply for small grants for projects, work with people, and write proposals for the many resources provided by youth organizations, for example, “Global Youth Coalition on HIV/AIDS (GYCA) conducts online courses in proposal writing, advocacy, etc.” advises one youth leader.*

Evaluate

Be critical. Question your interests, the circumstances around you, and the poli-

cies and actions of those who are supposed to serve you and your community. Reconsider what you already know and what you hear. As you take action, do research to evaluate whether your efforts are making a difference for those you want to help.

- “Asking for advice is the most important tool that we have as youth. . . . My advice to other youth leaders is not to ignore the small people . . . sometimes they know more than those at the top,” says a Liberian youth leader.
- Check out TakingITGlobal's youth action guide, search for others, or create your own.*
- Talk with an open mind to people who you think your action will help, and find out what they need—and then adapt your plan to make it work
- Find out about youth involvement in monitoring and evaluation of programs that are designed to serve youth.

Cooperate

If you are going to make change effective, you must work with others: form alliances, collaborate, work collectively. Just as important, learn work to with people who have the power to help.

A young woman from Kenya became the first UN youth delegate from Kenya in 2005 by taking initiative to voice important issues and cooperate with Kenyan officials:

From the beginning of the year, from my organizational level, I lobbied and advocated for the youth to be included in all the processes on the MDGs. . . . We never missed their meetings, we worked so hard to have our thoughts and ideas put in. When it was time for the ministry to appoint the delegation, they appointed the most active and persistent.⁴

Join a local or national youth organization, or a global network of young people (such as TakingITGlobal, Youth Employment Summit campaign [YES], the Global Youth Action Network) who are taking action. This is an opportunity to find other young people that you can learn from and work with and a way to make your voice heard.*

Voice

You can hold civil servants, social workers, and policy makers accountable. Another important way to use your voice is to inform and learn from other young people.

One young activist from Italy found an alternative way to express her voice in the face of challenges:

I was tired of taking part in pro-youth consultation processes ending up in nothing, and was tired to keep talking but not having anyone listen. . . . I then decided that I [would] try to change it, and worked toward the aim of setting a youth platform, Youth Action for Change, to make my voice heard—and every other young person for that matter—heard.... The project proved very successful. . . .⁵

A youth leader in Singapore says:

About voice: know how it works. It's difficult to effect any real change if you don't know the political infrastructure.... Talk to youth-friendly people in civil service or NGOs which effectively engage with government.

These four tools are just the beginning. Use these and others to motivate your plans and develop capabilities for action.

Who can help

Many groups exist to help young people take action. If you would like their help, make your voice heard. As in the story from Sri Lanka, young people can often have a big impact at the local level. Global youth organizations (mentioned above) are a network for many small, local organizations. At both the local and global levels the UN has worked to include young people. The World Bank has begun to involve youth organizations by providing courses, and by consulting with youth about its programs. At the local level, the World Bank has civil society and youth liaisons in its country offices. At the global level, see the work of the Youth, Development and Peace Network.

In the end, it is up to you—your involvement is crucial to increasing the role of young people and youth issues in efforts to alleviate poverty.

*See the following Web sites: Development Gateway: www.developmentgateway.org/youth, GYCA: www.youthaidscoalition.org, Taking IT Global: www.takingitglobal.org, Umsobomvu Youth Fund: www.uyf.org.za, UN: www.un.org/youth, World Bank: www.worldbank.org/childrenand youth, www.youththink.org, Youth Employment Summit Campaign: www.yesweb.org.