

Introduction

The progress of civilization is largely determined by the extent to which each individual is given the opportunity to contribute to the development and advancement of society. The world's 1.2 billion young people aged 15-24 constitute 18 per cent of the global population and are an essential part of this process. Aside from their material and intellectual contributions, young people offer unique aptitudes and perspectives that must be assimilated into the broader development paradigm and translated into effective action on the ground. Unfortunately, negative perceptions of youth, the failure to help them develop to their full potential, the inability to recognize that investing in youth benefits national development, and the consequent unwillingness and incapacity of society to fully involve young people in a meaningful way have effectively deprived the world of a resource of inestimable value. Unless a sustained effort is made to ensure that youth are given the opportunity to contribute to the well-being of their societies, the goal of achieving of "a society for all," as called for at the World Summit for Social Development in Copenhagen in 1995, will never be achieved.

The vital role young people can play in the development of society was formally recognized by the United Nations for the first time in General Assembly resolution A/RES/2037 (XX) of 7 December 1965, comprising the Declaration on the Promotion among Youth of the Ideals of Peace, Mutual Respect and Understanding between Peoples. Noting that "young people must become conscious of their responsibilities in the world they will be called upon to manage," the resolution officially acknowledged the importance of youth engagement in addressing global development issues. Several decades later, the World Programme of Action for Youth to the Year 2000 and Beyond, adopted by the General Assembly in its resolution 50/81 of 14 December 1995, identified the "full and effective participation of youth in the life of society and in decision-making" as one of ten priority areas requiring action by Governments, the international community, civil society and the private sector. The Programme of Action (paragraph 107) recommended the following interventions to facilitate the achievement of this goal:

- (a) Improving access to information in order to enable young people to make better use of opportunities to participate in decision-making;
- (b) Developing and/or strengthening opportunities for young people to learn their rights and responsibilities, promoting their social, political, developmental and environmental participation, removing obstacles that affect their full contribution to society and respecting, inter alia, freedom of association;

- (c) Encouraging and promoting youth associations through financial, educational and technical support and promotion of their activities;
- (d) Taking into account the contribution of youth in designing, implementing and evaluating national policies and plans affecting their concerns;
- (e) Encouraging increased national, regional and international cooperation and exchange between youth organizations;
- (f) Inviting Governments to strengthen the involvement of young people in international forums, inter alia, by considering the inclusion of youth representatives in their national delegations to the General Assembly.

This call to action has not gone unanswered. Over the past decade, recognition of the importance of investing in young people has grown at the national and international levels, and numerous programmes and activities promoting youth development and participation in society have been implemented. The necessity of involving young people in both conceptualizing and implementing policies and programmes is widely acknowledged. The dialogue on youth development, which only a few years ago was characterized by a top-down, adult-to-youth approach, has broadened and now encompasses more planned consultations with youth organizations.

YOUTH DEVELOPMENT: PROGRESS AND CHALLENGES IN AN EVOLVING GLOBAL CONTEXT

The United Nations defines youth as those between the ages of 15 and 24; today, this group would include individuals born between 1983 and 1992. In its broadest sense, “youth” is not so easily circumscribed; it essentially represents the period of transition between childhood and adulthood, the nature and length of which vary from one individual or society to another. What is certain is that young people undergo a variety of new experiences; they take on new roles and responsibilities and make decisions that ultimately influence the course of their lives (Lloyd, 2006). When society provides adequate and appropriate guidance and opportunities for youth development in areas such as education, health, employment, and sports and recreation, young people are more likely to transition successfully into adulthood and contribute meaningfully to the development of their societies. Conversely, neglecting to support the development of young people and failing to provide them with the knowledge and resources they need to make informed choices and move forward can derail this transition process, with potentially disastrous consequences for society as a whole.

Youth development, as defined in this report, entails actions and investments that enable young people to build and utilize their human capital and become productive adults. It is essential that Governments and other stakeholders design and

implement policies and programmes to protect young people from negative social and environmental influences that can interfere with their progress towards healthy adulthood. To benefit from youth capabilities, societies must ensure that opportunities for youth engagement in development processes are nurtured and protected. The failure to do so can lead to the exclusion and marginalization of young people, depriving society of their energy, dynamism and innovative spirit.

A number of historic events have occurred in recent decades that have helped shape the challenges and opportunities that young people now face. The toppling of dictatorships around the world, the collapse of communism, and the trend towards increased political and economic liberalization have brought about greater freedom of choice but have also produced a significant degree of uncertainty for the present generation of youth. Globalization has created tremendous potential for economic and social development, but it has contributed to heightened inequality and insecurity as well. The reverberations of the global economic recession in the 1980s and of the economic and financial crises of the late 1990s and the first part of the present decade are still being felt, undermining opportunities for youth development. Young people face harrowing difficulties entering and staying in the labour market; many cannot find jobs in the formal sector and may languish in the informal economy. Others are employed but remain poor because of inadequate remuneration; employers often discriminate against youth, especially young women. Labour market difficulties are related to issues, challenges, and policy and environmental factors specific to each region and are examined in some detail in the present report.

On a more promising note, the commitment of the international community to addressing the problems experienced by young people around the world is stronger than ever before. Global efforts in the area of youth development increasingly reflect explicit recognition of the importance of youth participation. Civil society groups active in this field, especially youth-led non-governmental organizations, are receiving growing international support. More is being done in direct collaboration with youth led-organizations to foster a broader understanding of the obstacles to youth participation and the benefits of involving young people in national development. Youth are frequently invited to join deliberations on major issues in global forums. Although many countries, particularly in the less developed regions, have yet to nominate youth representatives, youth delegate participation in United Nations meetings has grown considerably in recent years; past delegates, taking part in deliberations such as those on social development at sessions of the Commission for Social Development and within the General Assembly, have made significant contributions to the international debate on a range of issues. The international community as a whole has come to recognize the need for young people to be seen and heard in the development dialogue and has made a determined effort to involve them in global meetings and to support them in leading roles in such contexts.

At the country level, national youth councils are increasingly providing a common platform from which young people can work to influence decision-making. Young people, in particular those involved in youth organizations, have played a key role in establishing such councils in a number of countries, adopting a bottom-up approach in their formation and operation—even where they are institutions of State Governments. A national youth council promotes unity and provides the structure and focus needed for effective action and advocacy; it serves as an umbrella organization or national platform for youth associations, and its primary functions are to create linkages between youth organizations and the Government, particularly to ensure better communication and the implementation of youth programmes in the country; and to encourage youth participation less on an ad hoc, topic-specific consultation level and more on a coordinated and sustained basis (Kehler Siebert and Seel, 2006).

Youth organizations have been instrumental in bringing the perspectives of young people to the world's attention; they have fought to ensure that their members are included in the national and international dialogue, and that the needs and ideas of youth are considered in policy design, development and implementation.

As the needs of youth have become better recognized and understood, the collection and analysis of relevant data have expanded greatly, making it easier to monitor and evaluate the progress of young people over time. In spite of these gains, much of the discussion on youth participation continues to focus on strengthening youth involvement in political processes, neglecting the broader aspects of participation—in personal, educational, social and economic development—that are crucial for a successful transition to adulthood.

Although youth participation activities at the national and international levels are helping to facilitate the transition to adulthood, the potential for development in this area has not been fully realized. Approaches to fostering youth participation have remained rather narrow, with the benefits of inclusion sometimes regarded as accruing solely to youth rather than to society as a whole. Investments in youth have too often been viewed as a means of improving the welfare of young people rather than as part of an integrated national development strategy. Consequently, efforts to help youth understand their rights and responsibilities and to strengthen their social, economic, and political participation remain sporadic and diffuse. Government bodies responsible for youth development generally operate at the subministerial level or form part of underfunded joint ministries, such as those concerned with sports, culture or tourism, rather than being affiliated with the larger ministries in charge of labour affairs or economic development.

ORGANIZATION AND SCOPE OF THE REPORT

This report presents an overview of the challenges and constraints young people encounter during their transition to adulthood and assesses the progress made by Governments, youth and other stakeholders in facilitating this transition. The fundamental premise of the report and an analytical point of departure is that facilitating young people's transition to adulthood by improving their health prospects, expanding education and employment opportunities, and providing opportunities for participation in all aspects of development is an essential precondition for achieving the inclusive, equitable societies called for at the World Summit for Social Development in Copenhagen.

Youth are not a homogeneous group; the challenges and opportunities affecting their lives are broadly similar but are characterized by important differences deriving from unique contextual circumstances. To avoid addressing issues in a manner suggesting greater global uniformity than actually prevails, this report adopts a regional approach.

The seven geographic and/or economic groupings covered in the report include Asia, Latin America, sub-Saharan Africa, the Middle East and North Africa, small island developing States, Eastern Europe and the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), and developed market economies.¹ Because regions are defined in both geographic and economic terms, there is a certain degree of overlap, with countries sometimes identified as belonging to more than one region. For example, Japan belongs to the Asia group but is also listed among the developed market economies. Similarly, each of the small island developing States is part of a distinct geographic region. The trends examined in the report represent the conditions characteristic of a particular region or group and do not necessarily reflect the conditions prevailing in individual countries.

The succeeding chapters focus on various interrelated issues that have emerged as priorities based on recent economic and social developments in each region.

Chapter 1 highlights the challenges and opportunities related to globalization and education in Asia. Globalization has arguably had the greatest impact on the rapidly growing Asian economies. Large numbers of new industries have moved to Asia, attracted by low wages and production costs, and while many young people have benefited from this trend, others have not been able to find employment or are being exploited by those same industries in the absence of protective labour regulations. The progress made in the education sector has allowed some Asian youth to reap the benefits of globalization; however, inequalities in access and other significant challenges remain.

Chapter 2 addresses the transition from youth to adulthood in Latin America within a changing economic, social and political environment. The major economic transformations that have occurred in Latin America during the past couple of decades have dramatically affected the course of many young lives. Low-quality education and a lack of employment opportunities have contributed to increased poverty, fuelling widespread migration in many countries of the region. The socio-economic situation has also negatively affected the political fervor once so characteristic of the area.

The impact of poverty on the development of young people in sub-Saharan Africa is explored in chapter 3. There are presently large cohorts of youth in this region. With the consistent decline in population growth rates, a major demographic shift is occurring; however, the negative momentum created by past demographic growth is still being felt today in the form of intense pressure on limited government resources. For developing regions as a whole, the proportion of those living on less than US\$ 1 a day fell from nearly one third of the population to about one fifth between 1990 and 2004, while in sub-Saharan Africa the corresponding decline was only from about 47 to 41 per cent (United Nations, 2007). The consequences for youth of various dimensions of poverty are addressed in the chapter.

Chapter 4 examines the progress and challenges in youth development in the Middle East and North Africa, with a special focus on employment and gender concerns. This region has the lowest rate of youth participation in the labour force. Young people account for only about one third of the total working-age population, but because they are seriously underrepresented in the workforce they constitute almost 50 per cent of the region's unemployed—one of the highest rates in the world (International Labour Office, 2006). Growing numbers of skilled young graduates are vying for a diminishing number of jobs in the public sector. Young women are becoming more actively involved in the region's labour markets, but the rate of increase is slowing, and labour force participation rates for females remain much lower than the corresponding rates for males (International Labour Office, 2006).

The unique situation of youth in small island developing States is featured in chapter 5. Young people growing up in these countries face many of the same challenges and constraints as their contemporaries in other parts of the world, but the educational, employment and other problems affecting them tend to be related to the small size, relative remoteness, and other special characteristics of the island States in which they live. In many of these countries (particularly the Pacific islands), new opportunities and challenges are also linked to the relatively recent transformation from traditional to more modern societies.

In chapter 6 the report reviews the major constraints to youth development in Eastern Europe and the Commonwealth of Independent States, focusing on labour market difficulties and the HIV/AIDS epidemic in the region. The socio-economic transformation that has occurred in this area over the past two decades has

brought about significant changes in labour market prospects for young people. The vulnerability, poverty and social exclusion experienced by many youth in the region have been linked to a relatively high prevalence of risky behaviour, with substance abuse and unsafe sexual practices fuelling the spread of HIV/AIDS. The number of new infections has increased twenty-fold in less than a decade, and people under the age of 30 have accounted for 75 per cent of reported infections (Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS, 2006; Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS and World Health Organization, 2005).

Chapter 7 draws attention to inequalities in youth development in the developed market economies. Overall, young people in these countries have the best opportunities with respect to many of the priority areas of the World Programme of Action for Youth. However, access to these opportunities varies considerably. The chapter explores some of the more serious disparities, especially in the light of the demographic and socio-economic changes that are occurring within the context of increasing international migration into the region.

The final chapter summarizes the key issues and conclusions and offers a number of recommendations for future policy and programme development. A statistical annex reflecting the current situation of youth in a number of areas is provided at the end of the report.

¹ A list of the countries included in each region is provided in the explanatory notes at the beginning of the present publication.

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