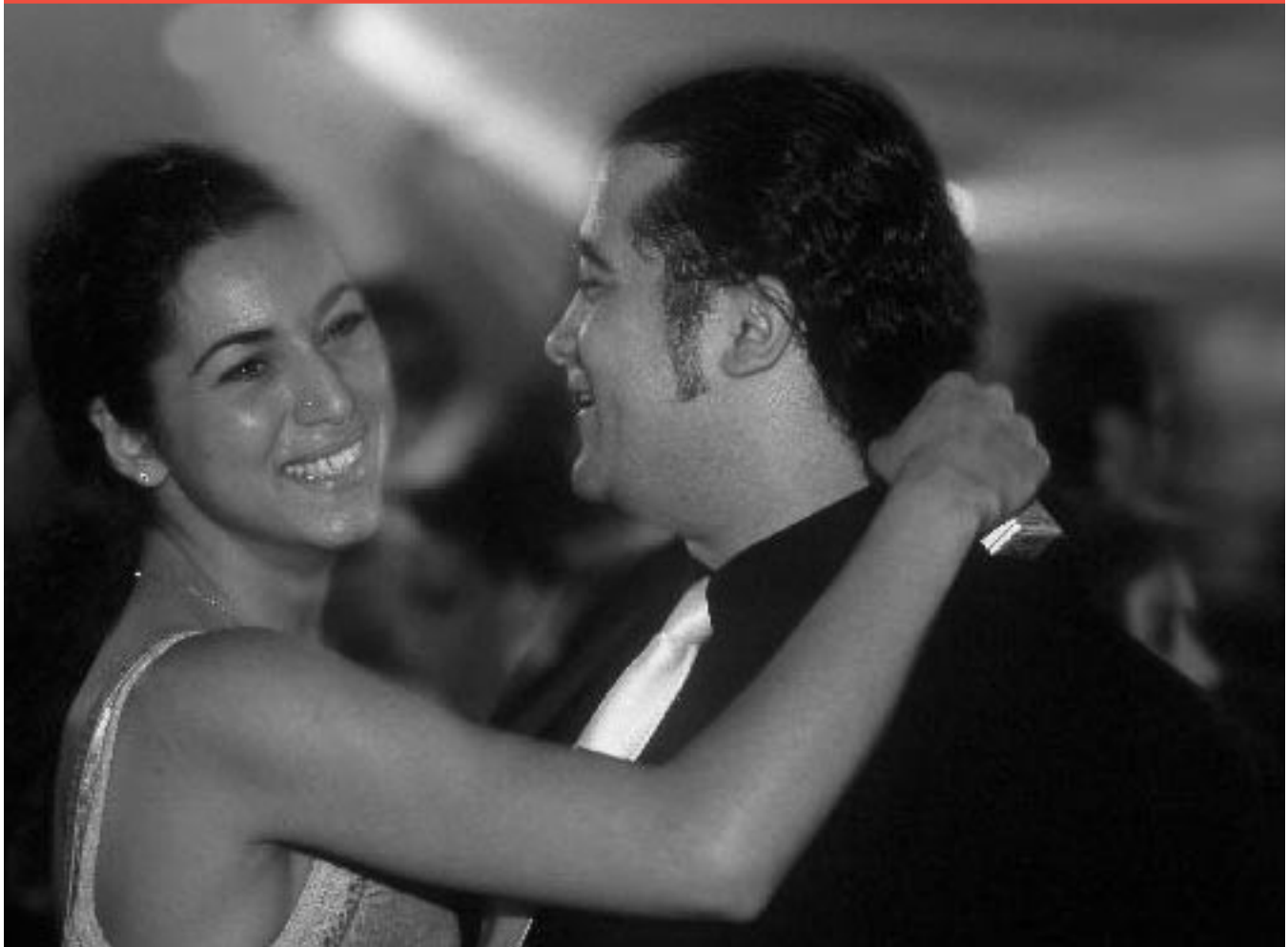## Chapter 8.

Rethinking *LEISURE TIME:*

Expanding Opportunities
for YOUNG PEOPLE
&
COMMUNITIES

The importance of leisure time *for young people, particularly as it relates to personal and community development, is examined in this chapter. It is imperative that youth be given a wide range of opportunities for meaningful participation within the community, provided or facilitated by a multitude of organizations, institutions and programmes in all sectors. The various sections in the chapter focus on how young people spend their free time, the developmental opportunities presented within diverse contexts, and the virtuous cycle of mutual benefit created through reciprocal youth-community support (illustrated in several detailed case studies). The conclusion emphasizes the importance of saturation (adequacy of opportunities is more important than variety), a solid infrastructure, a strong public and political commitment, and the recognition that leisure time and opportunities constitute a right to be protected rather than a privilege to be earned or lost.*

Certain major themes—basic health, risk behaviour reduction, education, employment and political participation—constitute the pillars of youth policy. Indeed, they are the foundations of human resource development in general, reflecting a continuum of goals from protection to prevention to civic and economic participation. They are the domains of responsibility of the main public systems charged with providing services and opportunities for youth. They represent the core indicators against which Governments and advocates track progress. They do not, however, represent the totality of young people's lives; herein lies the challenge.

In every culture, there are hours in the day when young people are not formally required to be in school or engaged in household or paid work. They choose to be involved in various activities, and there are public and private programmes, organizations and individuals who support their participation. These hours, these activities and often even these programmes are considered discretionary. They are viewed as optional—nice but not necessary, or even particularly important. These are the hours, the activities and the programmes whose absence or disappearance would not be noticed by policy makers but would be very much felt by young people. Public recognition of their importance is low, a fact reflected in the scarcity of relevant data.

Equally important, it is these hours, activities and programmes that policy makers, programme planners and frequently the public have few qualms about reducing. When crime rates go up, the quality and quantity of young people's discretionary hours are often diminished by strict curfews. When test scores drop or family incomes dip, opportunities to participate in voluntary activities are often restricted, as the hours required for work or study are increased. When public funds are low, sports, recreation and cultural programmes and institutions are often among the first casualties.

In a number of sectors, these hours and activities and the infrastructure that supports them are seen as promising means to achieve specific, well-defined ends, including delinquency prevention, formal education or HIV/AIDS prevention. Reducing idle time is adopted as a delinquency prevention strategy, youth counsellors are heralded as effective messengers for reaching peers and family members, and youth organizations are funded to reach and train young people who have failed in the mainstream educational system.

Too often, forays into discretionary space are taken without an appreciation of what that space is and what it does for young people. The ease with which policy makers and large-system planners confiscate time, redefine activities and supplant or take advantage of community programmes and organizations suggests a basic lack of understanding of, and a lack of respect for, what goes on when young people are not in school or at work.

The language used by those who study discretionary time and programmes does not help. Terms such as "leisure", "informal learning" and "play" imply a casualness of purpose and practice that does not do justice to young people, their activities, or the programmes and people that support them. It is possible that major systems including education and public health, formally held accountable for achieving visible, measurable outcomes through codified interventions and practices, may simply believe they are stepping into uncharted or at least unstructured territory.

The purpose of the present chapter is to take a step back from detailing current trends in leisure and out-of-school activities to present a frame for thinking about why discretionary time, activities and programmes are important and how they can be better leveraged to promote individual and community development.

The three basic premises underpinning this chapter are as follows:

- *Discretionary time plays an integral role in young people's individual development and the development of their communities.* The amount of discretionary time available to young people varies considerably according to age, gender and culture. In all countries, though, this time provides space in which young people make important developmental headway. Youth show signs of strain and depression in countries in which discretionary time dips below a certain threshold. The developmental progress made during discretionary time is not solely individual; how young people use these hours has significant implications for the communities in which they live.

- *The availability of a range of constructive, voluntary activities and opportunities to engage is critical to young people's development and their contributions to the community.* Activities should vary to address the broad range of young people's interests and needs, should adhere to what is known about supporting development, and should strive to offer outlets and support that are often more difficult to provide in larger institutions.

- *The choice of institution is as critical as the choice of activity.* Leisure activities and opportunities should be offered and made available by multiple institutions and organizations within the community. The decentralized infrastructure characteristic of most informal education, leisure-time, and community-based programmes is a useful counterpoint to large public institutions that determine not only what is done, but who is involved.

The first section of the chapter offers different perspectives on discretionary/leisure time, focusing on the developmental opportunities these hours offer, and presenting statistics and research on young people's leisure-time use and discretionary activities. The section concludes with the argument that young people will use

their discretionary time more productively if activities and programmes are of higher quality, are focused on life preparation and community participation, and address concerns about prevention and problem reduction.

The second section concentrates on the dual issues of young people's development and their community contributions, exploring through examples the reciprocal relationship between young people and communities, and the community as the context in which most young people spend their discretionary time.

In its entirety, this chapter is meant to locate leisure/discretionary time and activities within a bigger picture of what young people need and can do. Young people's leisure time and activities are inseparable from many of the other pressing issues affecting them (covered in the different chapters of the present publication), as the following pages will make clear. Leisure—used here to refer simultaneously to the hours, activities and infrastructure—is a key context for education and learning, for health care and the decisions that affect young people's health, for full participation, and for the use of ICT. It is inextricably connected with young people's employment opportunities and formal schooling. How young people spend their leisure time is also linked to pressing threats to their well-being, including HIV/AIDS, delinquency, conflict and drug abuse, and to issues of globalization and interdependence. Given these interconnections, it is critical that leisure be discussed as a context for the development of young people and their participation in the development of community and society. It is hoped that this chapter, as one piece of a larger puzzle, represents a useful contribution to the United Nations' efforts to understand and support the well-being of young people around the world.

RETHINKING LEISURE: HOW YOUNG PEOPLE SPEND THEIR DISCRETIONARY TIME

"There is nothing to do in Oakland, absolutely nothing. Young people are killed in car crashes every night because there is nothing to do but drive around."

—Young adult focus group participant, United States

Defining leisure time

Researchers draw the picture differently, but all agree that leisure time, at a minimum, is the waking hours during which a young person is not in school and not at work. School-related activities such as homework, Saturday classes and summer school are often counted as extensions of school. Chores and required family responsibilities such as childcare are often counted as extensions of work.

Pulling together a vast array of studies on how young people spend their time across cultures, R. Larson and S. Verma recently compiled a relatively clear picture of leisure time around the world.[1] The combination of immense diversity (within and across cultures, nations, regions, socio-economic situations and genders) and a shortage of data and credible studies (particularly those relevant to developing country contexts) make efforts to generalize difficult and tentative. While recognizing that doing so obscures important differences and missing information, it is nonetheless useful to use Larson's and Verma's effort to build a composite snapshot of young people's leisure.

Leisure time

The amount of time young people spend away from work and school work varies significantly across populations and regions. Differences exist within the developing world. In a Kenyan sample, 10 per cent of children's waking hours were free, compared with 63 per cent for a sample of young men in urban India. In developing country populations, boys tend to have significantly more leisure time than do girls, as the latter spend more time in household labour than do their male counterparts. In the developed world, about half of American young people's waking hours are free, and European adolescents seem to have about the same or slightly less leisure time, while Asian young people appear to have a quarter to a third of their time for leisure.

Leisure activities

While media use is not even mentioned in the developing country time-use studies Larson and Verma examine, it is a dominant force in developed societies. East Asian, European and North American young people appear to spend an average of about two hours daily in front of the television, with boys watching more than girls. Young people from all regions spend less than an hour reading each day, with those in the United States reading less than Europeans, and Europeans less than Asians. Music plays a less substantial role in young people's leisure time than any other activity. In terms of active, unstructured leisure, the time that younger children spend in play appears to be supplanted during adolescence by labour in developing and transitional populations and by talking (often more than two hours a day) among American and European young people, while children and youth in East Asia spend relatively little time in unstructured active leisure. Young people's engagement in active, structured leisure such as sports, organizations and the arts is also greater in Europe and the United States than in Asia; studies tracking organized activity participation in developing areas have not been carried out. Across regions, participation appears to increase as socio-economic status improves, with sharper rises in sports for boys than for girls, and a greater increase for younger than for older adolescents. Time spent "doing nothing"—waiting, hanging out and thinking, for example—takes more of Western young people's time than that of Asian youth, and perhaps more time of youth in developing than in developed countries.

Leisure locales and partners

In developing societies, young people tend to spend most of their time at home, with boys generally venturing outside the family with peers somewhat more than girls. Asian adolescents in developed countries, according to Larson and Verma, "spend nearly all of their non-school time at home", while young people in Europe and the United States spend significantly more time (perhaps a quarter of their waking hours) with peers. Perhaps most interesting, though, is research relating to the changes that may occur in young people's interaction with particular individuals or groups as they get older. According to the data amassed by Larson and Verma, American and European youth typically spend a decreasing amount of time with their families as they advance through adolescence, while time with family stays constant for African-American young people and youth in India, with an increase in family time for young Indian women as they get older.

Opportunities presented by adolescent leisure time

In many cases, discretionary time is thought of first and foremost as an opportunity for problem behaviour—as the time when young people get in trouble, roam the streets, engage in risky sexual behaviour and watch too much television. Concerns about potential risks during leisure hours are valid. However, advocates and policy makers should set their sights higher than whether or not young people are in trouble. Leisure time is also an opportunity for play and recreation—for self-expression and relaxation, and for young people to exercise their emerging self-control. Beyond this, though, leisure is when learning and development occur—not learning in the formal, academic sense, but no less critical than the learning that goes on inside schools. Finally, leisure time is the context in which young people flex their muscles as contributors and change-makers, as participants in the development of their communities and societies.

This is the opportunity of leisure—robust, varied and essential. Too often, though, risk rather than opportunity is the focus of programmes and policies that affect young people's leisure, and leisure is not imagined as the critical time it genuinely is. How leisure is perceived makes all the difference.

"Sports, leisure activities … and even paid entertainment allow individuals to manage their free time without constraints. Even in difficult situations, these activities give young people the opportunity to entertain themselves, to relax, to play, and to find cultural enrichment. … [These] activities give young people the possibility of self-expression, personal fulfillment, and personal development as an individual and as a member of a group. In addition, sports and leisure activities can raise awareness in young people that can inspire them to contribute to the improvement of their living conditions through volunteerism."

— Dakar Youth Empowerment Strategy (para. 58)

Problem reduction and prevention: hours of risk?

The out-of-school hours constitute a period during which bad things can and do happen, including drinking, smoking, unprotected sexual activity, delinquency and violence. It is nonetheless unfortunate that the reasons most closely associated with a willingness to support out-of-school opportunities are those that arise most often out of concern about the risks and problems associated with these hours. This perspective is reflected in the tone of popular media coverage focused on young people's leisure. Prominent news magazines in the United States lead with headlines such as "Wild in the streets" (Newsweek) and "Teenaged wolf packs" (U.S. News & World Report) when they report on young people's use their leisure time.[2,3] Coverage of children's leisure in South America and other parts of the developing world, especially that which makes its way to global media outlets, takes the street child as its primary figure, painting none too positive a picture.

It is not only the press that represents leisure as a time of risk rather than opportunity. Much of the international research on leisure focuses on young people's problem behaviour as well. Policies and policy debates tend to be framed from a problem-reduction standpoint; in the United States, for example, new policy commitments to after-school programmes were spurred largely by reports that juvenile crime rates spiked during the hours directly after school.

Problem-focused conceptions of leisure are shaped by a larger climate of negative perceptions about young people. Throughout diverse regions of the world, public attitudes, media and policies reflect the perception that young people are problems to be solved, seen in terms of their collective deficits rather than their potential. J. Boyden explains how two problem-focused images of youth—of children as potential victims of "pollution" by a dangerous adult world, and as young delinquents who pose a danger to others—"have been exported from the industrial world to the South", forming the basis for public policy as well as public attitudes.[4] Whether imported or home-grown, this mindset is not easy to change; in Brazil, it was not until a constitutional reform process and a major movement spotlighting street children swept the country that a decades-old child policy that criminalized youth in "irregular circumstances" was overturned and the focus shifted almost entirely to youth problems such as delinquency and abandonment.[5] Problem-focused policies go hand-in-hand with problem-focused media coverage. Research by young people in the United States on television and newspaper reporting revealed an increase in coverage of juvenile crime—just as actual crime rates dropped to their lowest levels in decades.[6] Perhaps in part because of such media coverage, focus groups of American adults refuse to change negative perceptions of youth, even when confronted with statistical evidence or compelling stories of young people's positive potential.[7] Even in post-apartheid South Africa, where youth played the decisive role in reshaping the country for the better and where forward-thinking youth policies have been put into place, public images of young people are largely problem-focused, as illustrated in the following:

> *"As the 1980s drew to a close, young people were gradually no longer seen as the engine of resistance … causing some to call those who grew up in the turbulent 1980s a lost generation. Many feared that young people would derail the democratic process or that the resistance movement would dissipate into a criminally inclined subculture."*[8]

There are certainly reasons to be concerned about young people's leisure time, and to view the development of positive leisure opportunities as part of a solution to youth problems. It is telling that when young people in the slums of Nairobi began to document life in their communities using photographs, they focused largely on violence, rampant drug use (including glue sniffing), and other negative "leisure activities".[9] In a very different context, the wider mass media coverage and the spread of Internet and other information and communication technologies, particularly in much of Asia, Europe and the United States, have resulted in a significant decrease in physical activity among young people, especially older youth.[10] It is true that young people disconnected from adult support and supervision are more likely to engage in a variety of problem behaviours, taking risks, performing poorly in school, and abusing substances.[11] Young people who have left the school system and have not found paid employment—youth for whom discretionary time is all the time—need and deserve policy attention in all regions of the world.

Real and potential difficulties notwithstanding, viewing young people's leisure time primarily as a problem to be fixed ignores the possibilities of this time. It results in policy responses aimed at filling or diminishing young people's leisure; such responses include programmes that provide little more than basic supervision, longer

school days, curfews that keep young people out of the public eye and, at the extreme, increased investment in facilities for juvenile delinquents. At a more basic level, it sells young people short. It does not do justice to the possibilities and potential of young people, nor does it contribute to the development of those qualities and skills society will require from them as workers, citizens, and community and family members.

Preventing problems is an important but inadequate goal; remaining problem-free does not fully prepare young people for the challenges and responsibilities of adulthood. A prospective employer may be introduced to a young man and told he is not a drug user, a gang member, a dropout or a teen father. The employer might be impressed but would be far more interested in whatever (applicable) knowledge and skills the young man possessed. Efforts must be made to define—and to give young people ample opportunity to identify and understand—the values, attitudes, knowledge, skills and level of commitment expected of them with as much clarity as undesirable qualities have been defined; otherwise, the disconnectedness in youth development will persist.[12]

The logic applied above is not only relevant to the world of work. Young people must be more than problem-free when they go to the ballot box for the first time or take on parenting responsibilities, and they should learn to be good neighbours. It is critical that leisure be seen as more than a time of potential risk to young people, during which problems must be prevented.

Play and recreation: time for fun and exploration?

Young people's discretionary time is worth a significant amount of attention, partly because it is a potential breeding ground for youth problems, but mainly because it presents endless possibilities for constructive development. It is critical that a positive vision of leisure time activities be put forward and defined, and that time and care be given to specifying how such time should be used and why it should be protected.

International plans and commitments such as the Dakar Youth Empowerment Strategy offer such a positive vision, taking a clear stand against severe infringements on young people's right to free time. Most have their source in the promise of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, amplifying, reiterating and expanding on the following basic provisions of article 31:

"1. States Parties recognize the right of the child to rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to the age of the child and to participate freely in cultural life and the arts.

"2. States Parties shall respect and promote the right of the child to participate fully in cultural and artistic life and shall encourage the provision of appropriate and equal opportunities for cultural, artistic, recreational and leisure activity."

Echoing these international commitments, a developing body of research—and a growing choir of advocates and practitioners—emphasize the importance of play and recreation for younger children. Leaders in child development have long identified play as critical space for children's cognitive, identity, and social/emotional development.[13] Research indicates that the specific types of thinking and problem-solving involved in play provide valuable skills for the future.[14] Researchers,[15] therapists,[16] and childcare practitioners have made play a central element of their work with children, with demonstrated impact.

While the nature of "play" may change as (especially Western) young people get older—with increases in peer leisure and time spent talking for some and in structured recreational and sports activities for others[17]—it appears to be no less critical to adolescents than to younger children. Though the precise effects are not certain, time spent informally with peers and adults in activities such as talking and playing is likely to result in both stronger social networks and stronger social skills for adulthood.[18] The physical exercise and habits associated with sports and recreation, again in concert with the social skills and relationships gained through such activities, constitute an important input to young people's health. Adolescents' play and recreation, though defined differently in cultures around the world, has intrinsic value.

The shift from a negative view of leisure to a positive vision that emphasizes the value of leisure in its own right is a critical first step towards protecting young people's right to discretionary time and to quality leisure activities. This message is important for developing and least developed countries, where economic pressures often propel young people into the labour force at an early age; it is equally important for highly industrialized countries concerned about improving academic performance.

Learning and development: more hours for academic learning?

Around the world, the amount of time young people spend in work has decreased, replaced by a larger amount of time in school. In the developing countries, school generally occupies a relatively small amount of young people's time. In much of Asia, however, the combination of a longer school day, an expansive network of non-school academic enrichment programmes (many geared towards test preparation), and more time dedicated to homework means that up to half of young people's time is spent in academic pursuits. In developed countries, frustration with educational reform efforts and continued pressure for academic achievement have resulted in an explosion of academic after-school programmes.

At the heart of this international phenomenon is an important fact: young people's learning need not—and does not—stop at the end of the school day. Their leisure time provides a rich opportunity for learning and a particularly rich climate in which to facilitate the development of lifelong learners.

Pushing for more "time on task", many programmes simply replicate the teaching practices used during the school day and extend them into young people's leisure time, despite growing evidence that "more of the same" is both unproductive and developmentally dangerous. Research supervised by Deborah Vandell shows that

young people in Thailand who were involved in high-yield arts and cultural activities that had reading, writing and mathematics as the "hidden curriculum" rather than the lead curriculum not only performed better on State tests than those enrolled in strict content-drill programmes, but were also emotionally healthier. This study speaks to a tension that is developing, at least in the United States, challenging the belief that academic outcomes are best bolstered by the application of formal school-derived practices during out-of-school hours.

Based on research findings such as these, there is growing recognition that learning during leisure hours cannot appear identical to that inside of schools and, equally important, an increased willingness to describe learning as a primary goal for leisure-time activities. The ideas of "serious leisure" and "leisure education" put forward by World Leisure in its *Charter for Leisure*[19] and other documents imply a set of principles, professional standards, practices and pedagogical orientations that are distinct from but complementary to what goes on in formal education settings. The model of learning put forward by J. Falk and L. Dierking goes further in specifying the contextual, personal and social factors in place when young people participate in learning that is volitional, recreational, and engaged in as a form of self-fulfilment.[20] Falk's and Dierking's framework for free-choice learning, developed through investigation focusing largely on museums, is one of a number of research-and-practice efforts to underscore the unique nature of learning that happens during leisure.

> ## Box 8.1.
> ### FEATURES OF POSITIVE DEVELOPMENTAL SETTINGS
> - Physical and psychological safety
> - Appropriate structure
> - Supportive relationships
> - Opportunities to belong
> - Positive social norms
> - Support for efficacy and mattering
> - Opportunities for skill-building
> - Integration of family, school and community efforts
>
> Source: National Academy of Sciences, National Research Council.

Other efforts push even further in defining the specific features of environments that support young people's leisure-time learning and development. International documents including "Programming for adolescent health and development: report of the WHO/UNFPA/UNICEF Study Group on Programming for Adolescent Health"[21] and *Adolescence: A Time That Matters*, published by UNICEF,[22] and country documents such as the New Zealand Ministry of Youth Affairs' *Youth Development Strategy Aeteatoa*, published in 2002, present a set of common features of environments that support young people's development. Research and synthesis by M. McLaughlin,[23] by J.P. Connell, M.A. Gambone and T.J. Smith,[24] by the Forum for Youth Investment,[25] and, most recently, by the National Research Council[26] confirms that there are core principles relevant to learning that goes on during leisure time—principles applicable to schools as well but not consistently present within them. This set of central principles—in reality, conditions for effective learning and engagement—includes, inter alia, the presence of caring relationships, challenge and relevance, choice and voice, high expectations, physical and emotional safety, and experiences of "mattering" and contribution.

This research and practice goes far in validating and clarifying the significance of leisure-based learning. Research results indicate that community-based leisure-time settings may actually be more effective than schools in engaging students in learning. A study by R. Larson indicates that young people are only cognitively and emotionally engaged a small amount of the time, even though such engagement is a critical pre-condition to learning.[27] Importantly, this combination of cognitive and emotional engagement is far more likely to happen in structured, voluntary leisure-time settings than during school. Apparently, the blend of principles that make leisure-based learning what it is offers a powerful model for engagement and achievement.

Based on these findings, stating that leisure time provides an opportunity for learning represents a richer and more promising claim than the argument that students should spend more time doing what they do in school. As indicated by the research just described, the "how" (pedagogy) of learning during leisure is significantly different. The "what" of learning—the appropriate content for learning that goes on outside school hours—is also different. As both the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Dakar Youth Empowerment Strategy acknowledge, leisure time is critically a space in which young people express themselves creatively, take part in arts and cultural activities, and develop as individuals. Culture, creativity, and identity are central, defining features of the content of learning during leisure time. Research confirms that leisure time is important in helping young people achieve a broad range of positive outcomes, as follows:

- *Social/emotional development and engagement:* the ability to respond to and cope with both positive and adverse situations, reflect on one's emotions and surroundings, engage in leisure and fun, and sustain caring friendships and relationships with others.

- *Vocational development and engagement:* acquiring the functional and organizational skills necessary for employment, including an understanding of careers and options and the pathways to follow to reach these goals.

- *Physical development and engagement:* biological maturation and the evolving ability to act in ways that best ensure current and future physical health for oneself and others.

- *Cognitive development and engagement:* the ability to gain basic knowledge, to learn in school and other settings, to use critical-thinking, problem-solving, and creative and expressive skills, and to conduct independent study.

- *Civic development and engagement:* the growing recognition of one's impact on one's surroundings and responsibility to others, as well as the ability and opportunity to work collaboratively towards a common goal.

Leisure is a developmental opportunity and an imperative. Larson argues that adolescence, including leisure time during this period, should be defined and understood as a time of preparation for family life, employment, good citizenship, lifelong learning and personal fulfilment.[28] It also provides an opportunity for the development of communities and societies.

Contribution: time to make a difference?

In many contexts, young people are required to use their non-school time to contribute to the livelihood and economic sustenance of family and community. As about half of the world's population are under 25, and between 14 and 21 per cent of the population in each of the world's major regions are within the age group 15-24, it is obvious that young people are crucial to their communities' well-being. A significant number of those in the latter group are economically active, with totals ranging from roughly 28 per cent of Western Asia's young women to more than 75 per cent of Oceania's young men in 1995.[29]

Reliance on young people as a source of labour and economic well-being is a necessity for many. However, youth in such circumstances often sacrifice their individual development for the sake of family security, and may be exposed to exploitative and unhealthy labour conditions.

The important role that young people play in sustaining their families, communities and countries suggests that their discretionary time may represent a potentially powerful force for renewal, contribution and change.

Around the world, young people are proving that leisure represents a prime opportunity not only for individual development, but also for contribution and change (see boxes 8.3-8.7 later in the chapter). Rates of voluntary participation in community building and community development have increased dramatically among youth in many regions. Young people have demonstrated the desire and capacity to use their own time to make an impact on their communities and societies, as illustrated by the following:[30]

- *Reclamation*. In some situations, young people seek to recover lost community capacity and well-being. Young people in Cambodian squatter communities, living with broken infrastructure, poor sanitation and garbage-lined streets, decided to take back their neighbourhoods through a combination of youth-taught classes, massive volunteer clean-up efforts, and community organizing activities.

- *Creation.* Some young people create new infrastructure and community resources where the need exists. In Nairobi, the young people of the Mathare Youth Sports Association have set up a sanitation infrastructure for their neighbourhood, running the garbage trucks that clean their local streets.

- *Preservation and conservation.* Recognizing that they have something worth holding on to, the corps members of the Southeast Alaska Guidance Association help ensure that Alaska's natural beauty is not destroyed by those who travel there to appreciate it. This effort is one of the many examples of young people working to keep their culture, environment and history alive.

- *Development.* The high school students of Lubec, Maine, in the United States demonstrate that young people can play a vital role in the complex, professionalized work of community development, in this case by incubating small businesses, testing aquaculture technologies, and doing real research that yields potential new directions for a challenged local economy.

- *Building.* Young people can help build their communities, constructing greater connectedness, leveraging human resources and community assets, and forging common agendas, as the young leaders of Cefocine in Guayaquil, Ecuador, have done with their blend of education, arts and action.

- *Change.* If the systems in place do not work, young people often take responsibility for reforming or reinventing them. In the American city of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, the members of the Philadelphia Student Union are organizing for genuine educational change, sitting down with school and city leaders to negotiate improvements in everything from bathroom and hallway safety to the quality of their textbooks and teacher training.

The preceding examples, as well as many others, were explored as part of several years of research on the connections between youth development and community change undertaken by the Forum for Youth Investment with the support of the Ford Foundation. A key component of this work was international dialogue sustained through the International Learning Group on Youth and Community Development (ILG).[31] Practitioners from over a dozen countries grappled with some basic questions about how opportunities, expectations and roles varied across cultures, countries and contexts. The three lessons that came through with particular clarity in this work are highlighted below.

Opportunities for contribution are greater in countries where there is real need. Opportunities for recognized, real contribution are more widely available in countries and contexts in which unfulfilled needs relate to basic services, basic rights and access, or political stability and voice. From the slums of Nairobi to the steps of Parliament in Paraguay to inner-city and rural communities in the United States, young people—who are often a majority of the population—have brought about real change. In situations in which the infrastructure and institutions are sturdier, young people have fewer openings for meaningful, visible and respected contribution. In such circumstances, the challenge often lies in ensuring that service opportunities and organizing activities are not assigned marginal, "make-work" status but instead produce tangible results.

Involvement and participation should not be limited to older youth. The philosophies and realities of contributing to one's community can start at an early age. Several ILG members were awed when they met elementary school students in the La Vega neighborhood of Caracas who had produced textbooks for use by even more disadvantaged middle-school students in a nearby neighbourhood. Efforts such as these are rooted in a sense of social responsibility, as evidenced in a statement by one of the 10-year-olds in the class:

> *"I teach other students to read and write and add. Someone thanked me and I said, 'Don't thank me because it is an honor to teach the future of Venezuela. We are here now but we will be leaving—and what we will leave behind is an imprint on the future.'"*

For experts and practitioners struggling to build a bridge between young people's development and the development of communities, words like these are both compelling and instructive.

It is important to strike a balance between community and youth outcomes. In the ILG discussions and others, a basic debate arose about how a young person could be expected to contribute to community development when their own basic needs were not being met. One participant asserted that it was useless to talk about youth participation without discussing the exclusion of young people from education and employment. There were also concerns about the over-involvement of young people. In less industrialized countries, in particular, the value of young people as a current resource (to work, fight and mobilize) is often so high that they are not afforded leisure time. In child labour and other such contexts, youth development is sacrificed in the name of community development. In the developed world, in particular, community development leaves little space for young people, and the challenge is often to "fill the empty time". Finding a new balance between youth and community development is critical in either case, as is achieving a balance within youth engagement efforts.

Figure 8.1
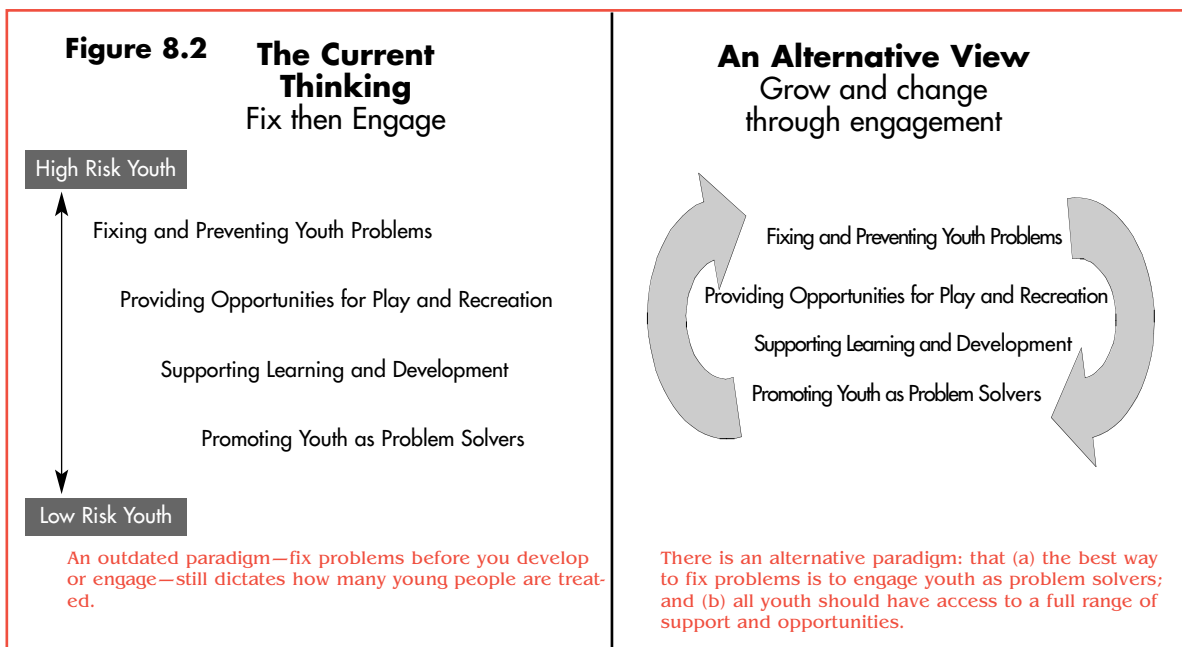**Youth and community outcomes: a difficult balancing act**
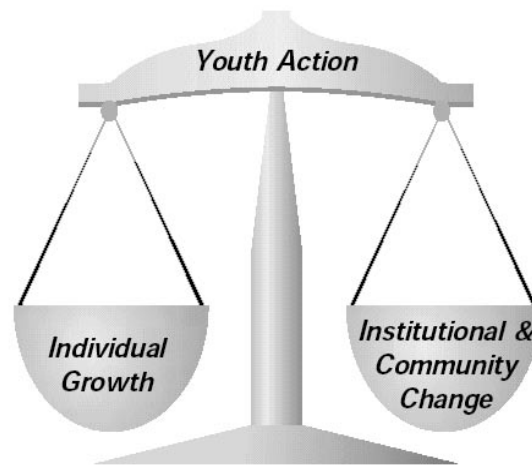
How can goals related to individual growth (developing skills, confidence, values, experiences) be balanced with the goals of community change—finding efficient, systematic ways to effect measurable change in communities?

In discussions addressing the issue of balance, one of the key concepts that emerged was the "alternative view" represented in figure 8.2. ILG members concluded that one of the most effective ways to help and encourage young people who had very little in terms of support and opportunities was to involve them in addressing the challenges faced by them personally, by their peers, and by their families, communities and societies. By drawing on and developing their expertise in dealing with problems directly affecting them, and by engaging them in devising solutions, contribution and development become inseparably joined. This way of thinking about opportunities for young people speaks directly to the challenge of reconciling the multiple goals of leisure time.

Coming full circle:
the inseparable goals of leisure time

In too many communities and for too many young people, solving problems, promoting play, relaxation and self-fulfilment, supporting learning and development, and encouraging engagement and contribution to community are still seen as competing options rather than complementary goals.

An old paradigm that focuses on fixing the problems of high-risk youth, providing opportunities for leadership and contribution to the lucky few, and helping the vast group in the middle meet their basic needs and prepare for adulthood often holds sway in policies, public attitudes, and programmes aimed at supporting young people. The options that are provided (or not provided) are often based on society's sense of whether young people are a problem or are problem-free. High-risk youth are targeted with programmes meant to solve their difficulties, rather than with opportunities to build their capacity and make contributions. Youth identified as low risk are given a wider range of options, including opportunities for contribution. A "fix, then develop, then contribute" formula remains dominant (*see figure 8.2*).

Figure 8.2

The Current Thinking
Fix then Engage

High Risk Youth

Fixing and Preventing Youth Problems

Providing Opportunities for Play and Recreation

Supporting Learning and Development

Promoting Youth as Problem Solvers

Low Risk Youth

An outdated paradigm—fix problems before you develop or engage—still dictates how many young people are treated.

An Alternative View
Grow and change through engagement

Fixing and Preventing Youth Problems

Providing Opportunities for Play and Recreation

Supporting Learning and Development

Promoting Youth as Problem Solvers

There is an alternative paradigm: that (a) the best way to fix problems is to engage youth as problem solvers; and (b) all youth should have access to a full range of support and opportunities.

In reality, all young people need a full array of basic services, consistent means of support, and challenging opportunities. All youth have problems that need fixing, as well as the capacity to contribute and solve problems. The best way to help them tackle their difficulties is to engage them as problem solvers (*see figure 8.2*). Vulnerable youth are perhaps those most in need of opportunities to participate and take action, given that young people in low-income communities have significantly fewer opportunities at present.[32] It is equally clear that the most effective problem-prevention programmes are those that support, and provide the critical means of support for, development.[33] An emerging approach helps young people to fix problems by engaging them and to prevent problems by ensuring their access to basic support systems and opportunities.

LEVERAGING LEISURE TIME:
A COMMUNITY CHALLENGE AND OPPORTUNITY

Ideally, young people's discretionary hours are those over which they have some control, hours during which they can choose to do things that interest them with individuals or organizations that interest them. Because these hours are discretionary they come with the potential for enormous individual growth and community benefit. The present section focuses on two interrelated facts: (a) the potential for young people's contribution is unlimited; and (b) the context in which young people exist can either support or sabotage their development. These contentions are best expressed as follows:

> "Young people contribute to all sectors. Our teachers are young people, our police are young people, and our nurses are young people. It is young people who give dignity and pride to our nations. Young people go out to the Olympics and win medals. Youth create culture
>
> and music. ... (Yet) the concept that young people are good for nothing and they are not reliable—many people hold this idea."[34]

> "The local environment can help, or hinder, young people's development. The local environment encompasses all those factors that contribute to an area's uniqueness as a place and community, including its physical, social, economic, political and historical characteristics. ... Planners, designers and managers ... must understand the impact that local development decisions have on young people's lives."[35]

Communities provide the overall context for young people's learning and development. As Larson's and Verna's research suggests, when young people are away from the family, it is in the parks, streets, faith institutions, businesses and community organizations that they spend their discretionary time. Leisure-time use is ultimately an issue of how young people engage in community life. A community that recognizes the potential of young people's leisure time will (a) provide the full range of formal and "discretionary" community resources to support youth and their development, supplementing formal education and family experiences (a vision of communities supporting young people); and (b) engage young people as actors and contributors in all aspects of community life, including during their leisure time (a vision of youth contributing to communities) (*see figure 8.3*).

Figure 8.3
**Communities and young people:
a shared vision for contribution**

Young people and adults working together to create the necessary conditions for the successful development of themselves, their peers, families and communities

Youth Contributing to Communities

Communities Supporting Youth

Source: M. Irby and others, *Youth Action: Youth Contributing to Communities, Communities Supporting Youth*, Community and Youth Development Series, vol. 6 (Takoma Park, Maryland, FYI, 2001).
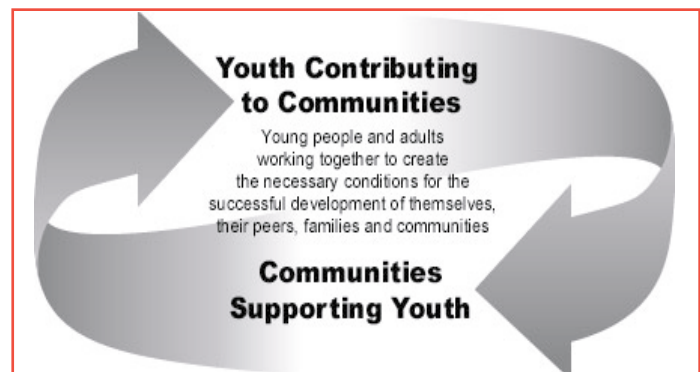
These two ideas are explored further in this section, and several examples illustrating key elements are provided.

Do communities really support young people?

If young people are to move successfully into adulthood—problem-free and fully prepared and engaged[36]—it will be in large part because of the support and opportunities they are able to access in the places where they live. Common sense indicates, and research confirms, that community support mechanisms matter. The overall climate and context of young people's neighbourhoods have been shown to make a difference. For instance, young people who have more adult support in their neighbourhood are less likely to experience depression.[37] In neighbourhoods in which there are more professional jobs available, young people delay sexual activity and childbearing.[38] A high degree of neighbourhood connectedness, shared values, and common commitment reduces crime rates and creates a safer environment for young people,[39] and in stable neighbourhoods people are more likely to provide mutual support. Perhaps just as significant as the overall neighbourhood context is the impact of individual non-parent residents on young people's successful development; a number of studies point to the positive influence of faith leaders, extended family members living in the community, neighbours, and other local adults.[40] These adults are, in many cases, a critical part of the leisure lives of young people.[41] None of this should come as a surprise since, regardless of the culture, young people spend an increasing amount of their time exploring and navigating the larger community of which they are a part.

Of particular importance are the structured services, support, and opportunities available in communities during young people's leisure time. As indicated in the previous section, young people are more consistently engaged—cognitively and emotionally—in structured out-of-school settings than during the school day.[42] This higher level of engagement appears to result in better outcomes for young people, particularly for those who lack opportunities in other parts of their lives. According to a major report prepared by the National Research Council on youth in the United States, young people who take advantage of community-based opportunities and support are less likely to engage in negative behaviour and show higher positive developmental outcome rates. These findings confirm the results of dozens of studies on community-based leisure-time opportunities and young people's development, a selection of which reveals the following:

- Adolescents who participate regularly in community-based programmes experience better academic and social outcomes, including higher education and career aspirations and achievements, than do teens from similar backgrounds.[43]

"I sometimes think that community is the enemy of young people."

— Allá, age 22, Egypt

Box 8.2
LESSONS FROM ANOTHER FIELD: A COMMUNITY FOCUS ON CHILD HEALTH

In creating a community focus around leisure, a number of core principles can be adapted from community-focused efforts made by and for other sectors. For the World Health Organization, in the field of child health, a community-based approach achieves the following:

- Involves people—by acknowledging the vital role of the immediate community in a child's healthy growth and development;

- Adapts to community needs—by recognizing that priorities are best set by the people involved;

- Builds on existing resources—by enhancing community structures and expertise;

- Strengthens links—between health services and the people they serve, making them a more valuable community resource;

- Avoids duplication—by working in harmony with single-focus health programmes, not in competition with them;

- Builds bridges—between community groups, NGOs and the private sector, both within and outside the field of health, from mothers' support groups to education and development initiatives;

- Focuses on outcomes—identifying the key care practice needed by families to improve their children's health, while being flexible enough for countries and communities to adapt the practices;

- Is cost-effective—because it maximizes use of existing resources and focuses on low-cost interventions which have the greatest impact on child health and development;

- Is sustainable—because it is cost-effective, builds on existing structures and responds to the needs and priorities of local people.

Source: World Health Organization, excerpt from Improving Child Health in the Community (WHO/Department of Child and Adolescent Health and Development, 2002) (WHO/FCH/CAH/02.12), p. 4.

- The National Longitudinal Study of Youth, a large ongoing public survey, has found that students who report spending no time in extra-curricular activities are 57 per cent more likely than those spending one to four hours in such activities to drop out before reaching twelfth grade. Studies by J. Eccles and B. Barber[44] and research synthesized by D. Vandell and L. Shumow[45] echo these findings.

- Reginald Clark found that economically disadvantaged children and youth in poorly performing schools who participated in constructive learning activities for 20-35 hours per week during their free time got better grades in school than their more passive peers.[46]

All indicators point to the fact that young people need and deserve early and sustained support throughout their waking hours to achieve a broad range of positive outcomes. Family support and public policy commitments are extremely important (a concept explored further below); however, it is even more directly a community-level responsibility to support youth during their discretionary time, and the quality and quantity of that support is critical.

Box 8.3

It is hard to know where to begin in listing all the challenges that face the impoverished communities in and around Guayaquil, Ecuador. Some 82 per cent of residents live in poverty, and the consequences of this poverty run deep. Those who take public transportation run the risk of assault by the rampant gangs. Parks and wells alike are rendered unsafe by the garbage and sewage that pollute them. The neighbourhoods lack basic infrastructure and must manage with few health services, little sanitation, a massive shortage of jobs and inadequate schools. A woman living in one of the cooperatives says when it rains, streets turn into rivers and garbage floats on the surface. "It's impossible to walk, because the currents could take you," she explains, "and that is just one of the problems of the community."

Facing this laundry list of woes, the young people of Cefocine have responded in perhaps the only way possible: they create, they play, and they turn weaknesses into strengths. In the process, they have changed the face of their communities. The roughly 30 leaders of Cefocine—boys, girls, young men and young women concerned with growing poverty—coordinate a variety of programmes that together reach more than 1,000 children, young people and women. The result is an inseparable mix of youth development and community development, all led by young people themselves and tied closely to the communities in which they work.

Children: from games to social criticism—before age 11. Cefocine's work starts early, with 2- to 11-year-olds, when most organizations are thinking about childcare, not social change. The centre of these programmes, as with everything at Cefocine, is creativity and fun; children plan and create cartoons, videos and other works of art. However, it would be a mistake to dismiss their work as all fun and games. Their cartoons focus on community concerns chosen by children, including their family, violence, ecology, hygiene, rights and relationships at school. As they produce their own media, these children learn to be critical of the media images and advertising they are exposed to every day.

Young people: from gangs to agents of change. "The youth have all the energy and the enthusiasm. They can transform their community's reality through their work. All the energy that a gang uses in a negative way, destroying and scaring a whole neighbourhood could—potentially, using it in a positive way—make the community better," says Nayla Bersoza, a 21-year-old Cefocine facilitator. This is the powerful logic behind Gangs: A Bet for Hope, an effort that has helped about 250 gang members become entrepreneurs and providers of vital community services. The effort combines educational, sport and ecological activities with youth-led business ventures such as a youth bicycle courier business. Many youth involved in the Gangs programme later become programme leaders, bringing the effort full circle.

Women: from isolation to power. "We started our work with children," explains Maribel, another of Cefocine's young leaders. "But as we were working we were finding other necessities and we started to expand the work, to make new projects that were not just with kids." One result: with 50 women, Cefocine developed Creative Hands and Minds, a project through which women come together to create handicrafts and, in the process, a major new source of family income. The furniture and crafts they produce are sought out by residents throughout the city, resulting in a change in perceptions and freedoms. The same city residents who had looked down on these women, stereotyping them as the wives of violent husbands and mothers of gang members, suddenly had to line up to buy the women's work. Just as it has changed the perceptions of outsiders, the women's newfound economic power has also brought greater equality inside marriages. Women with little room for self-expression and time with other females now have space of their own. "Before this we didn't know each other. We could have seen the other, but we never talked . . . now it's incredible because we are the best of friends," said one of the women involved. (*cont'd next page*)

Communities: from poverty to hope. A few years ago, Juan Montalvo and Julio Cartagena—two neighbourhoods in which Cefocine works—exemplified the effects of poverty visible throughout the city. Life in Juan Montalvo was particularly hard. From a simple survival perspective, only 3 per cent of local residents were over 46 years old, and in 1997, an average of 10 assaults occurred every day. The apathy among residents was obvious. Even the community house reflected it; it was abandoned and dirty, nearly destroyed. Thanks in large part to the work of Cefocine, both communities are far more hopeful places than they once were. The combination of new businesses created by women and young people, reduced violence from gangs, greater awareness of health and environment, and more opportunities for children add up to major changes in the character of these two cooperatives. For instance, acting on the suggestion of a young resident, the people of Julio Cartagena recently replaced a garbage-strewn gang battlefield with a park. In Juan Montalvo, a number of youth enterprises have started up. Not all the problems have been solved. However, in these communities—in particular Julio Cartagena, where Cefocine has been active longer—the people have recovered something they lost a long time ago: their faith. The signs of the transformation are small as well as large; "I've never been so kissed in my life," said one visitor, pleased and surprised, when visiting the cooperatives.

Young people in many Latin American communities—and in less economically developed regions around the world—end up playing vital community roles by necessity. In these communities, young people are breadwinners, caretakers and sometimes full community members by the time they reach their teens. Cefocine offers a powerful example of young people taking on these vital roles, while also getting the support they need to learn and grow — a true mix of community development and youth development.

Source: Based on Sabrina Duque's article, "Ecuador: linking youth and change", *CYD Journal*, vol. 1, No. 3 (Summer 2000), pp. 58-59. For a case study on Cefocine's work, see J. Tolman and K. Pittman, with B. Cervone and others, *Youth Acts, Community Impacts: Stories of Youth Engagement with Real Results*, Community and Youth Development Series, vol. 7 (Takoma Park, Maryland, Forum for Youth Investment, 2001).

Do youth contribute to communities?

The relationship between young people and their communities is one of give and take. There is no shortage of compelling stories to illustrate the contribution of youth to community development. Young people in India have organized themselves into a 13,000-member union to fight for their own and their parents' rights in the workplace. Others have led literacy movements throughout Latin America and fought racial oppression and discrimination in South Africa. Everywhere in the world there are examples of young people making a difference.

There is no shortage of young people ready to make contributions to their communities. More than a quarter of the 14-year-olds included in the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement's 28-country civic engagement study have worked with charities, and almost 20 per cent have worked with groups that do voluntary work to help their communities. Far more say they intend to be involved in political life in the future.[47] In terms of sheer motivation, a study in the United Kingdom found that community service is second only to dancing as the activity that gives people most joy;[48] 3.5 million British young people find it satisfying enough that they engage in voluntary work.[49] Research in the United States by Peter D. Hart Research Associates confirms that young people are looking for ways to become involved in their communities: "Contrary to the popular portrayal of young

Americans as self-absorbed and socially inert … (this generation is not seeking) to distance itself from the community, but instead actively looking for new and distinctive ways to connect to the people and issues surrounding them."[50]

Leisure time is the primary context in which young people make these contributions. While the growth in service learning and civic education in some countries has brought opportunities for contribution into schools, these initiatives tend to make learning—not meaningful contribution to community—their primary target. The relative control young people have over their time, the different societal expectations directed towards them, and the mandates of the institutions with which young people interact during their leisure time align to make it a space conducive to community engagement. As the stories included in this section illustrate, young people take advantage of this opportunity when given the chance to do so. The size and impact of young people's contribution during leisure time is impressive.

A full picture of reciprocal community support

What does it look like when communities are supporting young people and young people are supporting communities? Boxes 8.3-8.7 provide some indication, highlighting a number of successful efforts undertaken to build or strengthen this system of mutual reinforcement. The notion that all aspects of community life provide a space for young people's contribution, participation and development—a claim put forward at the start of this section—warrants further exploration. Communities are more than physical places and are more than the businesses, organizations and individuals within them. Communities are also about associations—about people coming together and working together towards common goals. Over the past few decades, community development researchers and advocates have increasingly underscored the importance of recognizing and strengthening the human, social, cultural and civic aspects of communities as well as the physical and economic components. Emphasis has also been placed on the importance of recognizing that every community has assets. No community, regardless of its level of physical deterioration or economic destitution, is without its strengths.

Embedded in communities are various assets—those aspects of community life critical to their functioning *(see figure 8.4)*. When communities are meeting the needs of their citizens, and when they are rich and viable places, they function and thrive across a range of areas. Such communities have strong physical, economic, and basic services infrastructures. These "bricks and mortar" that are often the target of community development efforts include the basic public works that make communities safe and workable and promote environmental health and sustainability. Beyond these essential tangible assets, well-functioning communities have strong human services support systems, including physical and mental health care and sustained care and supervision for those in need, along with a network of formal and informal educational institutions that facilitate continued learning and information exchange. They are well-governed places, enriched with independent organizations and citizen-led efforts that ensure deep and broad public engagement in political life. Healthy communities also incorporate a number of components that are less concrete but no less important; they are rich in cultural and artistic activity, provide space for religious

expression and commitment, and have strong social networks, relationships, and organizations. Finally, they are places where individual community members' strengths and competencies are respected, supported, and recognized as vital resources for community well-being (*see figure 8.4*).

All aspects of community life can and do play a critical role in supporting young people's healthy development. It is no coincidence that each of these areas corresponds to a fundamental developmental need of young people or to an area in which they are developing. The physical development of youth, for instance, depends in part on the availability of high-quality health care, and in part on a physical environment that provides shelter, food and a healthful natural milieu. The cultural life of a community shapes young people's cultural development, and further provides a uniquely rich environment for other aspects of development, according to research on arts and cultural programmes for youth (see below). Young people's development is not the singular responsibility of a set of educational and "youth development" institutions; it requires community-wide commitment and action.

Figure 8.4
A full picture of community: a range of aspects and assets
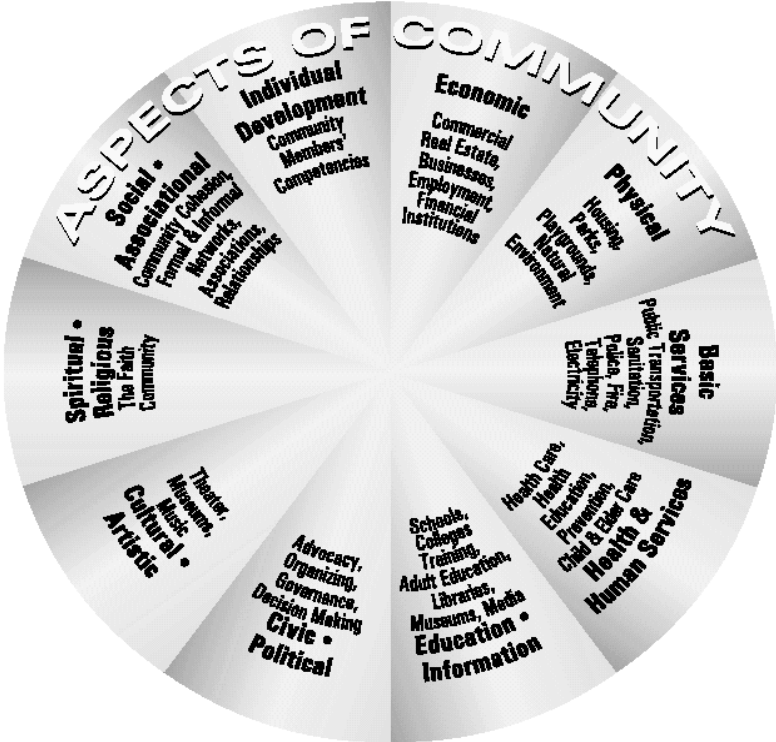
A survey of publications produced by foundations, intermediaries, research institutions and others (Forum for Youth Investment, "Pathways for youth and community development: a discussion paper" (Takoma, Maryland, FYI/International Youth Foundation, 1999, updated 2001)) revealed 10 types of community assets, which various types of community development efforts attempt to enhance. This initial scan has been vetted and refined through work with practitioners and experts internationally.

There are powerful stories and research illustrating what happens when each aspect of the community focuses its attention and resources on young people, exemplified in the following:

- *Physical infrastructure.* As D. Driskell and his colleagues on the Growing Up in Cities project team argue, "physical environment issues and action provide a valuable starting point" for efforts to create better communities for and with young people because of the tangibility of these issues, their significance for young people's development, and the real possibility of strengthening public commitment, involvement and goodwill in this context.[51] A number of communities have used this as a powerful source of leverage for their efforts to support young people. For instance, the Australian Youth Foundation has overcome concerns about vandalism, graffiti and intimidation and has created youth-friendly commercial developments, placing youth workers in malls, developing youth-specific activities, and bringing youth-developed planning guidelines into shopping centre development processes.[52] In Chicago, the Southwest Youth Collaborative has linked businesses, churches, organizations and a range of other community institutions together to form a network of spaces in which youth opportunities are available.[53]

- *Cultural and artistic life.* "To do youth development without the arts is like taking your toolbox on a carpentry job but leaving your hammer at home," writes M. Cicarelli-Green in a publication on the impact of arts and culture on young people and their communities.[54] Research on leisure-time programmes confirms that opportunities in culture and the arts seem to be particularly beneficial for young people's development, resulting in more ambitious future plans, higher levels of achievement and personal satisfaction, and a greater "willingness to take risks in learning" among young people.[55] Notable efforts thus far include the Cambodian Master Performers Program, through which young people apprentice with members of an earlier generation of Cambodian musicians and artists; Ecuador's youth-led Cefocine (*see box 8.3*); and the far-reaching Culture Builds Communities initiative in Philadelphia, through which community-based centres of arts and culture are being systematically incorporated into a programme to support and form partnerships with young people. This last initiative, rooted in research on the impact of arts opportunities and the finding that three out of four children in Philadelphia live within a mile of a community arts facility, has helped dozens of cultural institutions in the area create high-quality leisure-time opportunities for the city's young people.[56]

While their promoters claim that the two aspects of community life highlighted above are uniquely important to young people's development, there is little evidence that they are any more essential or powerful than other kinds of resources a community provides its youth. Similarly compelling stories can be told, and equally compelling research cited, that reveal how each of the other aspects of community life plays a vital role in supporting young people.

As mentioned previously, support extends in both directions. There are convincing stories and research showing what happens when young people focus their attention and resources on the various aspects of community life, as the following examples illustrate:

- *Health care*. Youth entering the health-care arena for the first time may find themselves in an unfamiliar world of medical malpractice, physicians' codes of conduct, hospital bureaucracy and genuine field expertise—hardly ripe conditions for meaningful contribution. Yet young people have found ways to make an impact in the community health sector. In Argentina, youth trained as reproductive health educators have joined forces to organize a national network to share practices, successfully lobby for laws that increase adolescents' confidential access to services, and expand HIV/AIDS education across the country. In the United States, college students involved with Project Health design and implement programmes that bring together existing community resources and medical infrastructure to better meet the needs of families. The results are impressive: their achievements include the establishment of a family help desk that links about 1,000 families a year with sources of food, safe shelter, health insurance, job training and child-care; the creation of a swimming programme that addresses the pervasive problem of urban childhood asthma, resulting in improvements in lung capacity representing four times what is possible through the use of medication; and the provision of personal support and advice to young people dealing with various chronic illnesses, helping them to better manage and cope with their diseases.

A survey of publications produced by foundations, intermediaries, research institutions and others (Forum for Youth Investment, "Pathways for youth and community development: a discussion paper" (Takoma, Maryland, FYI/International Youth Foundation, 1999, updated 2001)) revealed 10 types of community assets, which various types of community development efforts attempt to enhance. This initial scan has been vetted and refined through work with practitioners and experts internationally.

- *Basic services.* Organizations such as Cambodian Volunteers for Community Development and the Mathare Youth Sports Association (*see boxes 8.4 and 8.5*) exemplify young people's contributions to community development at the most basic level. Another example comes from Eastern Europe. After the fall of communism, the youth of Poland faced daunting obstacles to involvement in community change. The infrastructure of civil society barely existed. Adults were largely unconvinced that youth could play meaningful roles, as reflected in an old proverb, "Fish and children have no voice." Up to that point, young people's only experience in community participation was their homogenized, compulsory membership in youth organizations controlled by a repressive Government. Youth as Partners, named to emphasize the importance of youth-adult cooperation, was established to encourage, fund and support youth-initiated projects in communities around the country. Working with small grants of about $800, and supported by both local adult mentors and regional training, the young people involved have wrought dramatic changes in many Polish communities. For instance, after floods swept southern Poland, youth organizations participating in the programme took on vital and innovative roles in helping communities rebuild. One group organized a day-care centre for children left homeless by the flood and leveraged their own donations to convince local leaders to invest in the reconstruction of their community's church. Young people in another community developed a comprehensive network of bicycle trails in and around their city, using their Youth as Partners grant to both improve the physical infrastructure and develop relevant environmental awareness opportunities.[57]

- *Economic opportunity.* Young people in a growing number of communities, often in concert with adult allies, are starting entrepreneurial ventures aimed at reviving struggling local economies. In the Mexican state of Oaxaca, for instance, the young founders of the Committee of Volunteers for Reforestation and Environmental Protection (COVORPA) are several years into a venture to raise quails and repopulate the area with a traditional food source that had been disappearing from the region. Such efforts provide a compelling alternative to the "brain drain" many communities are experiencing as talented young people move from rural areas to areas of greater prosperity. In the words of Efrain Ragon Ibanez, the president of COVORPA:

  "We found that what we had learned in school did not prepare us to live in our communities. But we also found that there were things in our community that we could reclaim and start working from.... We wanted to show that young people could remain in their communities and have a good life."[58]

From a youth contribution perspective, each aspect of the community represents both a base of action (a starting point from which young people can become engaged) and a target of action (an area of community life on which young people's work can have an impact). In other words, the structures operating in each area—human services organizations, legal and educational institutions, and political organizing efforts—can act as the loci from which young people can offer their

contributions. Similarly, each is a viable place for young people to direct their efforts—an area of their community to which they can contribute. Some aspects of community life may be more open to young people's efforts. For instance, youth may find they can make more active and meaningful contributions to arts and cultural organizations than to financial institutions involved in community development. Similarly, some bases and targets of action may constitute particularly strong combinations; for example, community-based organizing efforts may be especially effective in bringing about educational change.

> "We start with what we know. Since many of us were interested in the arts, we have been using them as a way to learn about communities and society."
>
> —Aida, age 21, Egypt

Box 8.4
CASE STUDY: CAMBODIAN VOLUNTEERS FOR COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT—PHNOM PENH, CAMBODIA

Having survived the genocide and brutal reign of the Khmer Rouge, members of Phnom Penh's squatter communities have moved out of the international spotlight and into the quieter suffering of poverty. At least one organization, however, founded a decade ago by 40 young people frustrated by the state of their communities, is not allowing apathy and neglect to destroy their area. Cambodian Volunteers for Community Development (CVCD) blends opportunities for training in essential skills, a movement to engage young people in service activities, and deep community engagement efforts in a potent recipe for youth development and community change.

The impact of CVCD has been broad and profound. Between 1998 and 2000, some 3,000 people studied English or computer skills for a minimal charge, and 7,000 residents of squatter communities learned sewing skills, Khmer literacy, English, and environmental sanitation and hygiene for free. During the same period, 1,200 families in Basac squatter areas benefited from community cleanups, environmental education and regular garbage pickup.

The numbers are impressive, but the accomplishments of CVCD have also affected the community in deeper, subtler ways that reflect its fundamental commitment to human resource development as a long-term community-building strategy. One of the intangible effects of the Volunteers' work is a nationwide renewal in young people's civic engagement. Literally thousands of youth have a rekindled sense of cooperation, volunteerism, and civic commitment. These young people are not simply engaged in one-shot service opportunities; CVCD is the natural home for engaged young people on many levels. As a grass-roots organization, it is particularly open to the ideas and energy that young people bring to it. Its focus on education benefits young people as they seek out educational opportunities to change their own futures, and in the process learn that they can change Cambodia's future. Many students continue to work with CVCD long after their coursework has finished, and CVCD Executive Director Arun Sothea believes this experience helps them become leaders and allows them to sharpen their skills and improve their job prospects.

This change in young people has been accompanied by a gradual increase in neighbourhood capacity and power. Through the Volunteers' work, squatter communities are building the capacity for sustained, resident-driven change. CVCD has come to understand the necessary ingredients of sustainable community development. By organizing with community members, CVCD strives to change their attitudes and practices with regard to their environment. CVCD members begin by teaching about public health, then organize a series of neighbourhood cleanups that involve CVCD students and community members in mass area tree plantings and garbage collection. CVCD continues to play a role in the health of the community, leading cleanups as necessary and continuing to provide learning opportunities for young people.

This is a world full of dichotomies—youth and adults, human development and community development—that limit society's definitions and support for youth and their communities. CVCD is a powerful example of what happens when the lines are blurred. The CVCD mission statement, written by the Organization's young founders, is a perfect articulation of the balance between human development ("empowering [poor residents] to shape their own lives by teaching them literacy, job skills and health education") and community building ("encouraging and offering disadvantaged citizens opportunities to volunteer and cooperate in community development and environment activities"). With young people playing roles from student to teacher to organizational leader, it is nearly impossible to tell where youth development stops and community development begins.

Source: Based on a case study by Jeanie Phillips and the Forum staff in J. Tolman and K. Pittman with B. Cervone and others, *Youth Acts, Community Impacts: Stories of Youth Engagement with Real Results,* Community and Youth Development Series, vol. 7 (Takoma Park, Maryland, Forum for Youth Investment, International Youth Foundation, September 2001).

The limitations of a community perspective

While leisure opportunities are critical and are primarily a community responsibility, they are not singularly a community challenge. Many of the forces influencing young people's leisure choices, including the media, transportation, politics and pop culture, are larger than the community and are, at least in part, outside community control. These larger forces require attention from policy makers, advocates and researchers, as J. Mortimer and R. Larson argue:

> *"Social scientists who study adolescence typically focus on the immediate contexts of their day-to-day experience, especially the family, school, and peer group, and, more recently, the workplace. ... Neglected are the broader institutional forces and currents of societal change that affect the experiences adolescents have within these microsystems of development."*[59]

Mortimer and Larson point out half a dozen major macrostructural changes with an impact on adolescents—society-wide changes in demographics, economics, institutional systems and technologies, as well as adolescent-specific changes in the length and diversity of the transition to adulthood—each of which has implications for young people's leisure time. Some global trends, in particular the fraying and loss of strong community networks as rates of mobility and urbanization increase,[60] actively diminish the importance of community in young people's leisure lives.

Families, a variety of local institutions and other forces are smaller but no less important than the community. Whatever social shifts occur, families remain a primary and decisive force in young people's leisure lives and in their development towards adulthood. Other settings and actors, including peers, schools and voluntary programmes, also exert significant influences on young people's leisure and development.[61]

In the final analysis, however, the community is where opportunities and support are or are not available, even if those opportunities and support are simply ways to tap into the larger world. Similarly, while families, peers, programmes and other small-scale forces provide important inputs, it is at the community level that the range of young people's experiences comes together. Moreover, community conditions have a powerful effect on parenting and peer networks, as L.B. Schorr and W.J. Wilson have argued.[62] Community is the context for young people's discretionary time.

The same lessons that apply at the community level hold true within smaller and larger contexts. The reciprocal relationship between young people and their community also exists at the societal level. As J. Youniss and A. Ruth point out, it is critical to recognize "the active role adolescents play in shaping both their individual futures and the future of society":

> *"Adolescents are not passive recipients of macrosocietal change; they are actors within it. In some cases they create it. Adolescence is above all a period in which youth are required to be agents, to find their own paths, and, within the set of constraints and opportunities available to them, to mold themselves in ways that enable them to obtain the adulthoods they desire."*[63]

This is equally the case at the family and the programme level. Young people shape and are shaped by their families; they support the development of their families just as their families support their development. In effective programmes, at least, young people have access to multiple opportunities for voice, choice and contribution, and are critical actors in the development of those programmes. These interactions constitute a two-way exchange, with positive developmental outcomes on each side.

In sum, the main focus must be on communities because they are the primary and essential context for leisure, bringing together smaller-scale settings and serving as a mediating force for larger ones (*see figure 8.5*), and because the lessons learned at the community level are transferable to both larger and smaller settings in which young people spend their leisure.

Connecting the pieces, balancing the goals and acknowledging the larger contexts

All aspects of community life can and do support young people's development at all times—their leisure time included. Young people can and do contribute to all aspects of community development, and opportunities for contribution are particularly rich when young people are out of school and not at work. The challenge, though, is to connect the pieces in a way that produces optimal benefits for both. Efforts tend to be aimed at either supporting young people or eliciting young people's contribution rather than facilitating interaction between the two, and in each case, the focus tends to be on one aspect of community rather than on the range of aspects. What is being proposed here is community-wide commitment and focus, and connecting the two parts of the equation, so that young people and adults are working together to create the necessary conditions for the development of themselves and of their peers, families and communities.

Figure 8.5
Community as context for young people's leisure
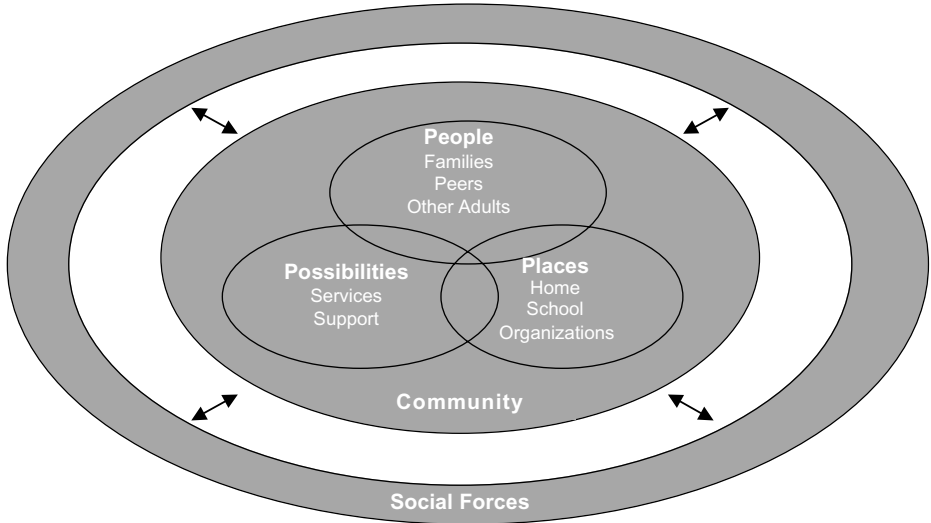
While forces such as families, peer groups, activities and organizations are critical in shaping young people's leisure, community is the context in which this range of people, places, and possibilities comes together. Community is also the context that influences and mediates how young people's leisure is affected by larger social forces and contexts.

Box 8.5

CASE STUDY: BLENDING RECREATION AND RE-CREATION MATHARE YOUTH SPORTS ASSOCIATION—NAIRO-BI, KENYA

Mathare, one of the largest and poorest slums in Africa, covers roughly 80 square kilometres around Nairobi. Home to several hundred thousand people living mostly in shacks with little or no water or electricity, Mathare's reputation over the years has been that of a very tough place to live, with rampant crime and drug use, high rates of HIV/AIDS infection, few recreational opportunities for young people, and a preponderance of easily preventable diseases stemming from the lack of proper sanitation.

In recent years, however, Mathare has become increasingly well known as the home of some of the region's most accomplished young football players—and some powerful examples of young people revitalizing their communities. For more than a decade, the Mathare Youth Sports Association (MYSA) has engaged local youth in athletic activities and enlisted their support in carrying out a range of community development initiatives. With upwards of 24,000 members, MYSA is now the biggest youth sports and community service organization in Africa, largely managed by youth under the age of 16. The Association's impact goes well beyond numbers, however.

The give and take between sports and service has been integral to the Organization's approach since the beginning. An early MYSA motto, "healthy athletes need a healthy environment", reflects its commitment to both young people and their communities. Participants spend 60 hours per month engaged in service work, which earns them points that are applied to their league standing.

Youth contributing to communities

In one of its first forays into the "healthy environment" side of its motto, MYSA initiated one of its most impressive contributions to the community, becoming the informal sanitation infrastructure for much of the surrounding area. At the time MYSA was launched in 1987 there were only a handful of garbage trucks serving Nairobi's population of 2.5 million, and they almost never made it to the slums, says MYSA founder and chairman Bob Munro. When its first cleanup efforts took place, MYSA made sure at least one city garbage truck showed up. "When it went to the slums, women started dancing," he recalls. In those days, MYSA youth carried out weekly cleanups using wheelbarrows, rakes and shovels. In 1988, MYSA acquired two garbage trucks and tractors of its own. Over a dozen youth now serve as truck and tractor drivers, responsible for clearing thousands of tons of garbage each month.

Along with garbage collection and cleanup activities, MYSA has initiated a number of other high-impact service programmes. Youth leaders receive professional training in HIV/AIDS prevention and then visit local communities to counsel other young people; since 1995, 200 youth trainers have reached more than 100,000 young people with critical information on AIDS prevention. MYSA has provided lunches and helped improve the jail facilities in which street children, many of them from Mathare, are temporarily held in Nairobi while being processed through the justice system. In 1998, with funding from the Ford Foundation, more than 30 MYSA boys and girls began documenting life in Mathare through photography and essays, resulting in the publication of a book entitled Shootback. Less tangible but no less important, MYSA has helped alter community perceptions of what is possible and instilled in community members a sense of pride in local youth.

Communities supporting young people

MYSA has also changed the opportunity landscape for Mathare youth, starting with access to recreation and physical exercise but moving far beyond as well.

Leadership development. MYSA has successfully fostered the development of leadership and management skills among participating youth. These young leaders are not young adults in their twenties; most of its several hundred volunteer coaches are under 16 years of age. "Youth make the decisions and feel responsible for making sure they're implemented. That's one of the reasons [MYSA] works," says Bob Munro.

Educational opportunities. With poverty forcing many talented youth to drop out of school, MYSA has been challenged to participate educationally as well as recreationally. MYSA youth leaders now earn points for their voluntary activities; the best leaders win annual tuition awards, paid to their schools. In 2000, upwards of 100 MYSA leadership awards were given. (*cont'd on following page*)

Gender equality. Another challenge was to change prevailing perceptions of the role of young women in Mathare. Traditionally in Kenya only boys played football. MYSA sought to change that as a means of empowering young girls and fostering greater gender equality. While it took time to train the girls, they now represent a significant portion of MYSA participants and play an active role in coaching boys' teams. "The girls now have greater confidence. They're more fit, more proud and don't tolerate any silly words or poor conduct from boys," says Munro. Gender relations go beyond the soccer field, too, as young men and women participating in a MYSA programme now meet in small groups to talk about relationships between sexes, what they want in marriage and how to work together.

Adults often wonder why the passion and focus that youth bring to the athletic fields rarely makes its way to their school work, their family chores or their community volunteering. The thousands of young people who have joined the Mathare Youth Sports Association are a testimony to the fact that the transfer can happen, and that recreation and community improvement can be seamlessly linked results of young people's leisure time activities.

Source: Based on a case study by Sheila Kinkade and the Forum staff in J. Tolman and K. Pittman, with B. Cervone and others, *Youth Acts, Community Impacts: Stories of Youth Engagement with Real Results, Community and Youth Development* Series, vol. 7 (Takoma Park, Maryland, The Forum for Youth Investment, International Youth Foundation, September 2001).

CONCLUSIONS: WHAT DOES IT TAKE?

Creating communities that support young people, and in which young people are significant contributors to community life, is anything but easy. No easier is the inextricably linked task proposed in the introduction to the chapter: promoting and protecting young people's discretionary time as critical space for their development and the development of their communities.

There is work to be done, and work being done, by a full range of actors at all levels to promote and protect young people's leisure, and to create communities similar to those described here. There is a need to be vigilant about language. Terms such as youth development and leisure may have narrower or multiple meanings with the public or policy makers. (A funding source once referred to promoting youth development as the equivalent of "shoveling fog".) While the definitions created by those steeped in the discipline may be quite precise, it is important to understand that changing public language use is a difficult task that requires concerted and sustained efforts as well as access to social marketing resources.

Increasing the quality and quantity of support and opportunities for youth cannot be achieved programme-by-programme. There are key leverage points that must be addressed in order to move a broad agenda for young people's development. Logic suggests that addressing these points is critical to moving the sub-agenda of promoting and protecting youth leisure. Three broad ideas frame the action agenda, as follows:

- *Saturation is important.* Because leisure opportunities—like broader opportunities to learn, connect and contribute—are ideally decentralized and diverse, it is easy to confuse variety with adequacy. Almost any community can provide a diverse listing of the types of activities available to youth; few, however, can argue that the mix, location and number of activities are adequate to meet current demand and generate increased usage. It is important to measure the availability of leisure activities at the neighbourhood level.

- *Infrastructure is important.* Because leisure opportunities are likely to be delivered in small packages created by a range of institutions and organizations, ensuring saturation requires creative solutions to the many basic issues and challenges associated with maintaining a system of services, including accreditation, standards and monitoring.

- *Public and political will are important.* As long as leisure opportunities are considered nice but not necessary, there will always be a need to "make the case" for them. Advocates must work to ensure that there is a climate conducive to action by amassing evidence, building constituencies and countering the negative perceptions of youth that cause the public to want to reduce rather than expand youth leisure.

There is a recipe for action embedded in these broad ideas that can be graphically depicted as a set of stacked tasks that require the combined efforts of a broad range of actors (*see figure 8.6*).

Figure 8.6
Increasing opportunities for youth: a recipe for action
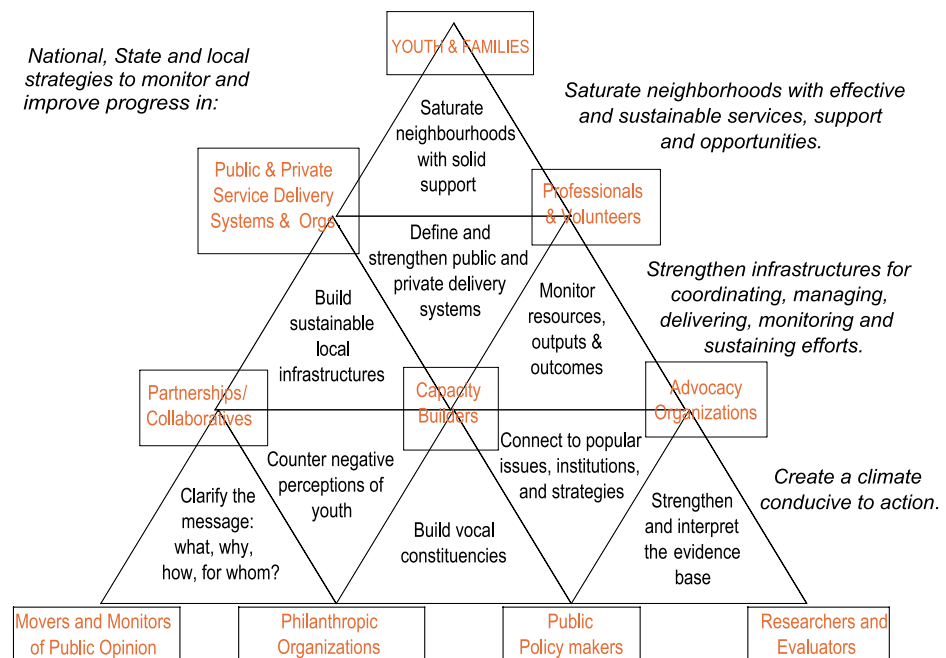
In endeavouring to promote and protect something as elusive and intangible as youth leisure activities, it is important to keep the big picture in mind: leisure is an end in itself, but it is also a means to other ends. The more the arguments for youth leisure can be linked to broader arguments for problem reduction and prevention, preparation and participation, the more youth leisure opportunities will be seen as a right to be protected rather than a privilege to be earned—or lost in lean times.

This chapter has focused on the value of establishing links between youth leisure and youth action—links that need to be made with practitioners and parents as well as with policy makers and the general public. The primary argument, however, is that leisure time, by definition, is time that can be spent in a multitude of ways that support the growth and development of young people, their families and their communities. ■

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[14] P.K. Smith and S. Dutton, "Play and training in direct and innovative problem solving", *Child Development*, vol. 50, pp. 830-836, for example, in R. Larson and S. Verma, op. cit.

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