

It's time for the paradigm to shift – youthwise



The future of the Commonwealth lies in its young people with all their creativity, potential and energy. They are our students, our young entrepreneurs, our workers and eventually our carers. They are also the very people who society is leaving behind, marginalised by their age, yet caught up in a rapidly developing world, which is losing the traditional boundaries that helped shape the generations that went before them.

They will inherit our world but have little say on what kind of world that will be, as decisions that affect the world's future are not left to them. Climate change, massive global economic shifts, depletion of resources and a potential energy crisis – these are all going to require bold new thinking and brave new action. To this end, we are responsible for equipping young people with the skills and tools they need to act positively and constructively. Education is central to this.

Today, young men and women are disproportionately affected by the current economic, social and political turmoil. The under-30 population currently represents over 60 per cent of the Commonwealth's citizens. They are the largest group ever to enter the transition into adulthood. By 2015, there will be three billion young people in the world, with 2.5 billion of them living in developing countries. The current and emerging imperatives of globalisation and of contemporary living predict that young women and men are likely to be exposed to more challenges and inequities than any other population group that has gone before.

Yet youth are not sufficiently empowered to address their concerns in the forums that matter: in policy-making and government. Across the Commonwealth, young people are dealing with HIV/AIDS, violence, unemployment, substance abuse and crime. It's time to recognise the unique role they can play by actively engaging them in finding solutions to these problems.

While the Commonwealth is often viewed as an old-fashioned association its values and style of operating are entirely appropriate for the demands and challenges of the 21st century. In 2007, the Commonwealth published the report 'Civil Paths to Peace', which was prepared by the Commonwealth Commission on Respect and Understanding and which looked into the causes of violence and extremism.

In the chapter on Youth and Education, the report states:

Young people are the inheritors of a changing world – its economic distributions, social positions, cultural identities and historical narratives. They need not be passive recipients of these things; with appropriate support and political will, young people can be an active, positive force for development, locally, nationally and internationally.

But for this to happen, it goes on, young people need to be seen and treated as potential assets and engaged in processes of dialogue and decision-making.

The Commonwealth is well positioned to facilitate this – a point reiterated by Lord Alderdice, the UK Liberal Democrat peer and member of the Commission. At an education meeting earlier this year, he told delegates:

As an association, the Commonwealth is uniquely placed – both in terms of its diversity and history – to make an important contribution both within its member countries and globally. The Commonwealth operates through the relationship of shared culture and diversity. Our differences do not need to lead to division, but to enrichment and diversity. The Commonwealth is not based on a model of dominance, but one of engagement, understanding and sharing.

Diversity, co-operation and a shared vision – this is how the Commonwealth has been working for the past 60 years. And it is fitting that the theme for this year's anniversary looks back on the association's achievements and forward to its future: The Commonwealth@60: Serving a New Generation.

The theme recognises that young people need to be equipped to deal with the world they will inherit and it calls upon the leaders and policy-makers of today to help make this happen. To this end, the Commonwealth has invested in youth development to empower young people to become active participants in the decision-making that will affect their lives. They need our support.

For over 30 years, the Commonwealth Youth Programme (CYP) has worked to champion the rights of young people, ensuring their engagement in the development process so that they can play an active part in reversing marginalisation, poverty, illiteracy, unemployment and disease. We push for young people to be represented at all levels of decision-making, including a seat and voice at the table when Commonwealth Ministers meet on youth issues.

CYP is a single-focus youth development agency and our work is conducted through four regional centres – in Zambia, Guyana, India and Solomon Islands. During the past three decades, we have forged cultural, geographical and historical ties with young people, governments, National Youth Councils, Youth Commissions and civil society organisations across the Commonwealth.

The participation of young people in decision-making is integral to our work at CYP. Our work affects those in youth development and we primarily work with Youth Ministries, Youth Development Professionals and Youth leaders in Commonwealth countries.

Below are some examples of where we have made a meaningful difference.

Rehabilitating former child soldiers

The Northern Uganda Youth Development Centre, a Government of Uganda project located in Gulu District and currently supported with funding from the Commonwealth Youth Programme, targets young people aged 15–25 in Gulu District and will subsequently expand to cover the Acholi sub-region. The project aims to help young people gain decent employment through learning vocational and other skills and also create a healthy young labour force to ensure a constructive contribution to the development and peace-building process. It will also facilitate youth involvement in social and cultural reconstruction as a way of helping them reclaim their identity. Dialogue and the promotion of reconciliation and peaceful co-existence are encouraged at the Centre. This effort is directly aimed at the families and communities who have been torn apart by the conflict.

Peer counsellors increase understanding of HIV/AIDS

The Commonwealth Youth Programme helps young people in Commonwealth countries to target issues like HIV/AIDS. Young Ambassadors for Positive Living (many of whom are HIV positive themselves) are taught accurate information and trained to communicate with young people about the virus. To date, over 200 young people across Africa, Asia, the Pacific and the Caribbean have received training.

These ambassadors organise 'street plays', which are performed in villages or open fields and which contain information on HIV/AIDS. Doctors provide advice regarding the content in the scripts and often attend the plays, so they can answer questions raised after the production. Music concerts take place with ambassadors performing in areas such as shopping malls. The music, which tempts a young crowd, contains messages that address important points about HIV/AIDS.

Commonwealth Youth Credit Initiative (CYCI)

The CYCI was set up to offer loans, training, education and business support for young men and women across the Commonwealth. It was piloted in Zambia, India, Guyana and Solomon Islands, and has since been replicated in a further 12 countries. In India alone, nearly 1,000 people gained functional literacy through the project, and 9,000 have been exposed to health-awareness camps and exhibitions.

The loan from the CYCI has helped me to be independent and not to be a sex worker... I can buy my own soap, food, clothes. (CYCI participant, Florida Harrison, from Malawi).

Commonwealth Youth Development Awards

The Commonwealth Youth Development Awards were established to recognise significant contributions to the development of young

people in communities. Every year, approximately £35,000 is made available to outstanding youth-led initiatives. Recent winners of the Gold Award include a soil regeneration project in India and an initiative in Fiji to provide alternative livelihoods to the drug trade, including fishing, farming and a canteen business. Through these awards, CYP recognises the efforts of young people to develop their communities by creating innovative and sustainable development projects. The projects are evaluated on the participation of young people in identifying, planning, implementing and monitoring the project.

Youth Development Diploma

The Diploma in Youth Development Work, currently offered by 29 partner institutions in 45 countries, is designed to provide youth workers with an underpinning knowledge on which to base their work with young people; an understanding of the values and ethics of the profession, grounded in the values and principles of the Commonwealth; and the practical skills to undertake the work. The Diploma is made up of 13 'core' modules, in addition to region-specific modules. The modules cover topics such as enterprise and economic development, youth policy, gender, health, project management, the environment and sustainable development. Each module takes approximately 4–6 weeks of full-time study but students are free to arrange a different schedule in their individual 'earning agreement' with the university they are registered with.

Education has a central role to play in our vision for young people. It's about their own learning, both formal and informal. It's also about educating today's leaders and policy-makers on the importance of engaging youth in a meaningful way.

In Malaysia at this year's Education Ministers' Meeting, the Youth Forum will focus on core concerns and questions of young people in education. It will discuss the relevance, quality, accessibility, and accountability of education and how it can prepare them for life and for employment. Further, it will raise the issue of how the school environment can become a democratic space for students' participation. There will also be a joint session with universities, students and employers about defining and meeting the needs of all stakeholders.

As primary recipients of education, we believe it is essential that young people have a say in the processes that determine their learning. You cannot have an education system without consulting the very people who will benefit from it. It's time for a paradigm shift – youthwise.

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