

A young girl with a warm smile is the central focus, holding a thick wooden staff over her shoulder. She wears a vibrant purple shirt with a pattern of red and orange sun-like motifs. In the background, two other children, a boy in a yellow shirt and a girl in a pink shirt, are also smiling. The setting is outdoors with trees and a clear sky.

REFRAMING YOUTH

Reflections from the May 2013 Child Rights
Working Group conference

Plan International Australia 2013, on behalf of the Australian Council For International Development Child Rights Working Group

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CONTENTS

Acknowledgements	3
Foreword	5
Introduction	6
Understanding the Youth Bulge: definition and context	7
Why is youth participation important?	8
Terminology tangle – how useful is the term youth?	9
Life cycle approach to children and young people	10
The Vulnerability of Youth	11
Youth Contributions to Society	12
Social inclusion of Youth	13
Youth in development policy	14
Recommendations	15
Conference Executive Summary	16-18
Endnotes	19

FOREWORD

The graphic has been designed by Tuen Man Cheung, a 17 year old member of Plan International Australia Youth P.A.C.T (Youth Planning A Change Today). P.A.C.T is a team of young people interested in combating the issues that are plaguing the wider world by raising awareness and encouraging small changes in everyday life. Having attended the conference as a youth representative, Tuen was asked by Plan to provide this foreword.

In Tuen's words:

Visually this digital painting depicts a child walking up a flight of "stairs". However, the stairs actually symbolise the triangular shape of a population pyramid. Furthermore, this shape is an indication of an increasing population, as there are more youths relative to older age groups in a certain country. From what I learned from the conference, if we -- as a global community -- all view this bulge of youth (who are now entering the economically active age bracket) as something positive and not a negative, we can then further aid the development of many countries around the world.

[Tuen Man Cheung](#)

Plan International Australia, Youth PACT (Planning a Change Today)



INTRODUCTION

**We cannot always build the future for our youth,
but we can build our youth for the future.**

Franklin D. Roosevelt (1882 - 1945)

Global population trends mean there are more young people in the world today than ever before. It is clear that equitable and sustainable development depends on creating an environment in which young people can exercise their rights and have the support necessary to achieve their full potential now and into the future.

This publication aims to contribute to the dialogue on involving youth in development, with the aim to raise awareness among Non Government Organisations and civil society. It draws on material presented at the Australian Council For International Development (ACFID) Child Rights Working Group conference *Reframing the Youth Bulge: From Problem to Solution*, held at Australian National University on 3 May 2013.

Our explicit aim is to frame the issues facing youth in development in more positive terms – to suggest that young people are not themselves an issue to be addressed, but are a key partner in development processes and capable of making significant contributions to solutions.

The challenges young people face in engaging in decision-making processes and contributing to change in their communities must be acknowledged. These challenges include discrimination, lack of access to appropriate services, negative stereotypes and a lack of appropriate opportunities for involvement in policy development and decision making. These challenges may be due to the perceptions of decision makers, development NGOs and community members that meaningful participation of young people is either too hard, not effective or it is simply not considered at all. At best youth are seen

as leaders of the future, yet this ignores the value of their different perceptions, energy and abilities in the present.

“...While adolescents are often referred to as the ‘future generation’ of adults, we should not forget that they are also firmly part of the present generation of global citizens – living, working, contributing to households, communities, societies and economies...they deserve recognition, protection and care, essential commodities and services, and opportunities and support...”¹

Actively engaging with youth to understand what they value and involving them in policy development is an essential component of sustainability but does require development actors to be innovative. It also requires honesty in how the input of young people will be (and will not be) used in any given process.

The youth bulge can be a catalyst for innovation. Truly listening to children and young people about their values, concerns, hopes and valuing their contributions, should be as essential to development processes as gender analysis has become. It is not just because it will improve programming but also because it is their right.

Disclaimer

Although much of the content of this publication has been drawn from the conference, the content of this publication should not necessarily be taken as the views of individual participants or the official position of their agencies.

Registration desk at the conference.



Joshua Genner presenting at plenary session.



UNDERSTANDING THE YOUTH BULGE: DEFINITION AND CONTEXT

What's the situation?

Children and young people make up 50% of the world's population. Of the 1.2 billion people globally aged between 15 and 24 years, 90% live in developing countries.² This demographic pattern has come to be known as the 'youth bulge'.

The youth bulge is often seen as a negative issue, a development challenge. It is referred to as looming on the horizon as a problem no one quite knows how to deal with. This is commonly heard in Asia, the Pacific and Africa – the poorest regions in the world. Large numbers of young people have been linked to high unemployment, civil unrest and political protest, as well as challenging personal issues such as teen pregnancy, homelessness and HIV.

A new perspective

Instead of viewing the youth bulge as a problem, it is possible to harness the power of this younger population through a focus on improving access to quality education and employment opportunities. This approach should positively contribute to economic activity and political stability in these low income communities.

According to Justin Yifu Lin, the former World Bank Chief Economist, if young people have access to employment, then the number of dependent people in a country will decrease and create what is known as a 'population dividend'.

But employment is only part of the picture. Young people can be regarded as partners in development. In order for this to happen their participation must be prioritised, properly facilitated and valued by decision makers, development actors and communities. Although the participation of young people can be justified simply on the basis of democracy and human rights, there is also ample evidence that supporting a young person's rights to information, participation and development in programming improves development outcomes.

The research

In 2009, Plan and World Vision researched the issue of the participation of children and young people in preparing for and responding to disasters. The result was a report called *Children on the Frontline*. This research established that children and young people

are often excluded from the activities that contribute to building the resilience of their local communities but also that increasingly, there are innovative projects happening that utilise the fresh perspectives of young people. These include youth-led projects, where young people tackle their reality in ways that may have previously been overlooked – either by community leaders or even development agencies.

Young people experience the world differently to their adult counterparts. The reasons for this will be explored below. But as their perspectives on both the issues and their solutions are different, they can often be incredibly valuable.

The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees commissioned research in 2008 which investigated the divergence in views about violence against children between adults and children. It found that

“the divergences between children's and adults' accounts are not due to different experiences, but rather are the consequence of children and adults having very different perspectives of the same experiences. Children's and adults' perspectives about violence against children don't match because their beliefs and attitudes about what is fair for children are at odds with one another.”³

What's the future?

Children and young people have another compelling reason to be involved in the development of their communities – they have the numbers on their side, representing 50% of the world's population. A failure to address the barriers to their meaningful participation is not only a contravention of their rights but spells potential disaster when it comes to sustainability. It is a lack of succession planning on a global scale.

WHY IS YOUTH PARTICIPATION IMPORTANT?

Participation gives young people the opportunity to discuss and influence decisions that are important to them and affect them. It contributes to their developmental needs through capacity building and the development of social competence and social responsibility⁴ while benefiting organisations and communities.

Despite its widespread use, the meaning of participation in the context of children's rights is not always clearly understood and sometimes misused. This, according to Percy-Smith & Thomas (1999) is in part triggered by the fact that the term 'participation' is widely used to describe different forms of social engagement; from young people participating in a conversation or in games to young people contributing to the economic security of the family.

In the context of the Convention on the Rights of the Child the broad concept of participation includes a number of specific rights including the right embodied in Article 12 to express views freely and have them taken seriously, along with the other key civil rights to freedom of expression, religion, conscience, association and information, and the right to privacy.⁵ Truly inclusive and effective youth participation is about far more than gathering views in surveys or listening to limited numbers of representatives; it should be part of a process where young people can progress from being the targets of outreach, to being actively engaged in the planning and implementation of development interventions.⁶

In 2011 ChildFund Australia conducted a literature review exploring the positive and negative effects associated with youth participation in the context of international development. The review revealed a general lack of literature examining the development outcomes of youth participation but also produced some case studies of positive and negative development outcomes.⁷ A positive development outcome as a result of youth participation to emerge from the literature review was enhanced social cohesion. In the context of the youth bulge which is generally associated with increased potential

for violence and crime, youth participation in social programming develops and strengthens their ties and sense of responsibility to their communities effectively reducing potential for violence.⁸ On the other hand, a negative development outcome as a result of youth participation was revealed in the form of changing power dynamics between youth and their families and communities.⁹ Participation provides youth with opportunities for self-expression and changes their status from subservient, passive receivers to active agents, with perhaps access to resources that enable them to become independent. This however, should not discourage governments or international agencies from pursuing active and meaningful youth participation, it is simply a point to keep in mind when developing programmes. There are various case studies illustrating the benefits of meaningful youth participation with positive developmental outcomes, both for the youth's capacity development and for the development outcomes produced, and further research in this area would benefit future development program formation.¹⁰

To be able to participate, young people need to be supported and empowered. This involves supporting the development of important skills such as working in a group, speaking up in public settings, and the ability and confidence to be able to communicate and interact with a range of stakeholders. The process of participation is not about actions that are prescribed by others where young people have no influence over the outcomes of their decisions. Rather, it cultivates opportunities for young people to develop skills and competencies in a climate of mutual respect and understanding.

Young people are often viewed as “human becomings” rather than citizens in their own right. They need to be seen as citizens of today and not just as the leaders of tomorrow.

Paraphrased from Kesaya Baba's presentation.

Youth at the United Nations General Assembly campaigning for rights to education globally.



TERMINOLOGY TANGLE – HOW USEFUL IS THE TERM YOUTH?

Youth is something very new: twenty years ago no one mentioned it.

Coco Chanel (1883 - 1971)

Youth is a term with no single agreed definition. Different states, cultures and international organisations use different definitions.¹¹ The United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) categorises youth as young people between the ages of 10 and 24. In contrast Ghana's National Youth Policy categorises youth as young people between the ages of 15 and 35.¹²

In terms of human development, the capacity and maturity of a 14 year old is quite different to that of a 24 year old. Young people's own self identification varies depending on their age – a 23 year old may not identify themselves as part of the same age span as a 15 year old yet some definitions would place them in the same category. The term youth also sits across the use of terms such as child and adult, in that the age span of youth can include people under the age of 18 and others who can be considered adults.

Each society and culture defines youth differently; some at the onset of puberty, others as a result of a religious initiation ceremony or as a social status indicating marital, familial or socio-economic status. Some cultures do not view young people as full adults if they are unmarried or childless whereas other cultures emphasise chronological age, employment status or financial independence as markers of adulthood.¹³

Dr. Sharon Bessell from ANU has suggested that social age is a more useful way of approaching the concept of youth. This is because it draws on the importance of social and cultural variables and places the individual in their cultural and social context. For example, A 16 year old mother in Bangladesh may be considered a responsible grown woman with a family of her own and it would be inappropriate to approach her in the same way as a 16 year old high school student in a European country. In such cases chronological age becomes less relevant than social age.

Based on her ethnographic research exploring the concept of social age in an international cross-cultural context, Clark-Kazak distinguishes between the 'biological facts of human development and the social meanings ascribed to different stages in the life cycle.'¹⁴

The focus on chronological age reflects western legal traditions, which translated into international legal standards treats all people under the age of 18 as children regardless of their social context and experiences.¹⁵ The danger of such an approach risks patronising and infantilising youth¹⁶ who may hold the status of an adult in their community.

Assigning full legal responsibility as an adult at 18 years of age in international law implies a universal rate of development in childhood and youth when the reality is that experiences and rate of development vary depending on social, environmental, political and economic conditions.¹⁷ In its definition of a child, the CRC makes clear the age of majority is dependent on the cultural and legal context of specific countries. The Convention also protects the cultural identity of children which inevitably affects their social age. In practice, this can be problematic on working in development across cultures because of the differences in how children and young people are defined.

Young people will have different experiences and needs at different stages in their life and it is necessary to place them in context. Not all young people have similar experiences, needs or indeed develop at a similar rate. Some young people mature much more quickly than others due to circumstances outside of their control. It is important to take such factors into consideration when developing strategies and policies regarding youth.

It is essential to recognise that the broad category of youth contains internal distinctions based on age range with specific health, educational, psychological, economic and social challenges. A young person between the age of 15-19 will experience things differently to a person between the age of 20-24.¹⁸ Different stages in life cycles will present youth with different experiences and specific needs shaped by their cultural context, age, gender and socioeconomic status.¹⁹

LIFE CYCLE APPROACH TO CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE

One of the most crucial windows to ensure young people have the best possible support is between the ages of 0 and 8 years old. Children who feel happy, safe, secure and supported interact with the world in a more positive way throughout their lives. It is therefore crucial to recognise the links between early childhood care and development and positive outcomes for youth.²⁰

Dr Pia Britto has described early childhood as the strongest determinant of who we will become:

“The foundational stage of human development sets in place the trajectory for building human capital. It is this foundation stage that is probably the strongest determinant of who we will become – as individuals, as a society and as a country. But because this foundation stage does not have the appearance of massive infrastructure and is visually not powerful, we tend to overlook the awe and potential of early development...because babies are cute and dependent on the world for their development – we cannot see their power. We do not recognize that therein lies that potential to create transformative change.”²¹

Beginning a conversation about youth outcomes when children are in their infancy seems a little counter-intuitive, but the evidence to justify this approach is overwhelming. In fact the World Health Organisation has found that support of Early Childhood Care and Development programs is one of the most powerful investments a country can make in its future:

“Economists now argue on the basis of the available evidence that investment in early childhood is the most powerful investment a country can make, with returns over the life-course many times the amount of the original investment”²²

This makes more sense when we consider what is going on biologically during the period of early childhood. Children in this age group experience the most rapid period of growth of their lives. Furthermore the human brain is developed in a bottom up structure, so each stage builds on the previous one and will only ever be as strong as what came before.

There is also a ‘use it or lose it’ principle at work, in that babies are born with billions of brain cells that form physical connections called synapses as learning progresses. These synapses are “formed by stimulating interaction with the social environment, strengthen through repetition and wither through disuse.”²³

Depending on the amount of stimulation a child gets in these early years at least 80% of brain development occurs before the age of three²⁴ and by age four a child’s brain is 90% of its adult size.²⁵

Without adequate stimulation and nutrition at this stage a child is placed at risk of never being able to catch up to his or her peers who have had the appropriate levels of stimulation and nutrition. Those who are supported through early childhood in care and development programs are:

- » Less likely to die before the age of 5
- » Less likely to come into contact with the criminal justice system
- » More likely to enrol in school, attend and succeed while there
- » More likely to have stable relationships over their lifespan
- » More likely to have stable employment.

Pia Britto summarises these outcomes by stating:

“Children who participate in [Early Childhood Care and Development] programs outperform their peers who did not attend such programs with respect to any measure of cognitive and non-cognitive development.”²⁶

It demonstrates that at no other time during an individual’s life can you have a greater impact than in the early childhood phase.²⁷ there is also evidence that the most disadvantaged children experience the most dramatic developmental gains.²⁸

It is common to focus on different age groups separately in order to best respond to the specific issues related to various development stages, but this ignores the powerful links between various stages. If we begin our conversation about improving outcomes for youth in the pre-natal stage we will have a more consistent and effective model.

The greatest return on investment in youth occurs when it begins in early childhood and is continued through different life stages.²⁹ Although this publication does not give particular attention to other age groups, it is worth noting that the middle years of childhood are also a stage of development that calls for specific strategies and investment³⁰ and should not be ignored.

In this way we can view early childhood care and development programs as the most powerful pre-emptive strike against poverty and disadvantage that we have, and investment in youth as one of the most effective ways of consolidating the achievements and progress of investments in early childhood.³¹

THE VULNERABILITY OF YOUTH

Youth is a time of transition. Young people experience several transitions in their lives; ideally from school to work, from dependence to independence, as well as the physical, mental and sexual development from childhood through adolescence into adulthood.³²

Many programs in the development sector are targeted at children (below the age of 18). The childhood services offered by states, such as foster care, often finish at 18. While the level of support dramatically decreases, the years after 18 remain a potentially vulnerable time. Many young people will still be finishing their education; others will be entering into the labour market while others will be starting families with children of their own. Many in areas of extreme poverty will be pushed into these roles far earlier than their physical and cognitive development are ready for, such as in cases of early forced marriage, child labour and child headed households.

A crucial aspect of the Convention on the Rights of the Child is its recognition of the evolving capacities of children. In brief this is the

notion that as children grow their abilities also mature. This process is not just dependent on age but is influenced by the individual child, their environment, their physical and mental capacity, their experiences and support.

“The Convention recognises that children in different environments and cultures who are faced with diverse life experiences will acquire competencies at different ages, and their acquisition of competencies will vary according to circumstances.”³³

The process of physical, mental and emotional development is a continuous transition beginning in childhood, through adolescence, youth and finally into adulthood. It is illogical that programs and support to youth should cease abruptly when they turn 18. Continued support through development programs and government initiatives will promote a smoother transition into adulthood without leaving youth in a vulnerable position .

Dancing and football in Brazil.



YOUTH CONTRIBUTIONS TO SOCIETY

What constitutes a productive life? With a global economic recession and increased job insecurity and unemployment levels, how can youth contribute to global society? For Kaye Schofield from AusAID, the conference provided the opportunity to explore the notion that 'productive lives should not be confused with productivity'. Patrick Vakaoti, University of Otago, suggested that labour market participation is not the only meaningful contribution that youth can make.

Concerns over the employment of young people tend to dominate the public discourse. Every year, 121 million young people turn 16 and are ready to enter the workforce, according to UNICEF estimates.³⁴ Since 2007 youth unemployment levels have risen by more than 4 million to around 75 million according to 2012 World Bank figures.³⁵

International research has identified a general statistical relationship between youth, particularly young males, and political violence as a result of economic factors such as poverty, lack of employment opportunities and economic recessions.³⁶ This potential risk of conflict can be lowered with increased government investment in secondary and higher education³⁷ and close monitoring of economic opportunities for youth during periods of economic recession as a tool to avoid instability and violence.³⁸

It is easy to view the transition from school to work as a natural part of life but we should not assume that paid employment is the only option of value for youth. Economic recessions, high unemployment rates, job cuts and various other global factors may limit the opportunity for youth to obtain paid work. In situations where youth cannot obtain work to support themselves or contribute to their families and communities, what other options are they left with?

Perhaps it is time to view the situation from a different perspective and move beyond the categorisations of formal employment. A productive life involves participation in social, economic, informal and formal sectors which may or may not include paid employment. Youth can lead productive lives participating and contributing to their communities and nations despite a lack of formal employment opportunities in the context of economic recessions.

Khounkahn, from ChildFund Laos, presented a case study at the conference of their work with youth in Northern Laos (Nonghet) where young people, particularly young women, are contributing to their community. This innovative programme combines sport and development activities in an interactive and fun way. As there was no cultural precedent around rugby being a man's sport as it hadn't been played in the area before, it has become an activity dominated by the young women in the community. Young people run the sporting events as well as the development project side events. For example, part of a rugby match day will include peer to peer discussions around drug and alcohol use and self esteem. Community participation and education, supporting other youth and promoting healthy self esteem are valuable contributions that have an impact on society and younger people.

Youth have many valuable contributions to make to society despite a lack of formal employment opportunities as a result of global market and economic recessions. Although unemployment opportunities for youth are a serious global concern, youth are not doomed to live an unproductive and disappointed life. Economic contributions are at the only worthwhile contribution youth can make to society. Our understanding of a productive life should not be restricted purely to economic generating activities.

Youth taking a leadership role in the community.



Member of a Plan-supported youth club in Couffo, Benin.



SOCIAL INCLUSION OF YOUTH

Young people face many barriers to social inclusion. They experience layers of prejudice that often go beyond their age to include prejudice against their gender, sexual orientation and disability or illness.³⁹ Youth with a disability can often be excluded and restricted from accessing resources such as education and health services which impacts on their future lives.⁴⁰

When developing programmes that involve youth participation, considering the layers of prejudice that young people experience is an essential part of the development process. Girls and youth with special needs may require additional support to access basic services such as education because they can be discriminated against on the basis of their age, as well as other factors such as disability and gender. Sometimes an obstacle preventing access to services could be something as simple as a lack of a separate female bathroom on the school grounds, or a ramp to allow a student with a physical disability access to the buildings. Services and opportunities for development need to be available equally for all young people and it should not be assumed that solutions suitable for adults will be the same as those needed for young people.

Focus on health

The disabilities or illnesses experienced by young people include Non Communicable Diseases (NCDs) and chronic illnesses such as diabetes, heart disease and cancer.⁴¹ These young people are at greater risk of experiencing social isolation, bullying and even violence and abuse than other youth. Often illnesses and disabilities are seen as a burden, both financial and non-financial, on families and communities who cannot afford to provide the necessary health services and support. These challenges make it more difficult for the young people concerned to participate in their communities' life and they can be marginalised or isolated. Involving communities through awareness raising and education programmes will reduce the possibility of youth with an illness or disability being marginalised or isolated from their community.

A crucial aspect of understanding the needs of youth with a disability or illness is placing it in the appropriate social context. The concept of disability, like the concept of youth, differs across cultures and means different things to different people. In Cambodia, for example, there are two terms for disability: one term refers to a disability that is acquired through life events or circumstances and the other to refer to a disability with which an individual is born. This distinction is very important because certain connotations are attached to the different terms. A disability acquired as a result of military combat is given more honour and prestige compared to a disability that an individual is born with, which is often stigmatised.

Achieving social inclusion requires a two pronged approach: engaging communities to meet the needs of youth with a disability or illness through education and awareness; and just as importantly, engaging with youth to empower them and understand what they really need.

Eliminating structural barriers preventing youth with a disability or illness from accessing resources is important but stigma and marginalisation as a result of lack of awareness and understanding also need to be addressed. A youth with a disability or illness may identify a support network or group as more important than a structural facility enabling them to attend school.

Reframing the way youth with a disability and illness are perceived by their families and communities, and themselves, is essential to achieving social inclusion. Youth with a disability or illness need to be viewed not as burdens on families and societies but as capable individuals who will make valuable contributions with appropriate assistance. As the needs of youth with an illness or disability can differ significantly to the needs of adults (with or without a disability), solutions need to be tailored in order to be appropriate and meet various youth needs.

2011 treasurer of the Association of People with Disabilities of Jalapa, Guatemala advocating for the rights of people with a disability.



A young girl in Guatemala celebrating her 12th birthday with friends. When she is older she wants to be a teacher.



YOUTH IN DEVELOPMENT POLICY

Youth are often excluded from political processes and youth participation in programmes tends to be delivered as an add on rather than as a central part of programme and policy development.

Part of the problem is a lack of an official policy framework on youth. Ausaid does not offer a framework for youth development programmes or even have a definition of youth. Without clear guidelines on defining youth and how to engage them, the risk of youth being socially excluded from participating in the process of decision making on things that will impact them is increased.

This omission is not unique in the development world. The World Bank does not currently have a specific policy framework for youth.⁴²

Some agencies such as Plan and Oxfam are developing youth centred methodology in their policy and program development to redress this.

Youth experience events differently to adults and have different needs to adults that must be taken into consideration when developing programmes. The most effective way to understand youth needs is to directly engage youth and provide them with appropriate support to share their views and experiences. They know what problems they are facing and some issues that may be a priority for adults may not be a priority for youth.

The development community should be commended for their increased focus on the involvement of youth in international and national dialogue in the last decade. The review of the Millenium Development Goals, for example, has provided a great catalyst for increasing the voice of youth in development discourse. We heard from Lauren Bourke (youth delegate to the UN) and Natasha Butorac (Australian Representative on the High Level Youth Summit on the Millennium Development Goals), about some of the UN's initiatives to create greater youth participation, particularly among young women.

Similarly, many development INGOs have 'youth parliaments' and 'youth clubs' where elected young people can engage in high level discussions with adults. However, this method of youth engagement

can also be tokenistic and not representative of all young people. Youth who may be less educated or ethnically or geographically marginalised and those with a disability are seldom represented at these sorts of forums and discussions.

Often adults exclude youth from policy decision making. Excuses may be offered that the content is deemed too complex or not relevant for young people's needs. However, most policy decisions DO affect youth and they need to be included in the decision making process. It's important for adults to ask themselves, "how can we engage young people more effectively in the decision making and policy development process?" .

One of the ways to achieve this is to remove jargon and develop policies that are true to context, needs and that are realistic and applicable. Starting with genuine engagement (and follow through) with targeting young people in their communities is a good way to begin this process.

Drawing on the unique skills and opinions of young people in public policy also provides an opportunity to effect change at a broader level. Youth input into the policy making process may influence greater participation and policy acceptance amongst other youth. It is important that youth involvement offers something valuable to youth and is not a mere tokenistic approach. The question must always be asked, 'why would youth want to be involved in this?' Considering this should prevent efforts to include them becoming solely extractive, but instead ensure that participation is beneficial in terms of informing policy and being interesting and rewarding for the youth involved.

Perhaps the biggest issue facing youth in many of these Pacific nations is the fear – and reality – of finding themselves marginalised and voiceless (Giving south Pacific Youth a Voice – World Bank 2008)

Quote used by Kesaya Baba in her presentation, Victoria University of Wellington

Youth and peer educators in India supporting the Health Information Centre in Badarpur.



RECOMMENDATIONS

We applaud the efforts of Governments, International agencies and the development community to ensure the participation of young people in dialogue in development work and in the international community.

The Child Rights Working Group makes the following recommendations based on the discussions at the recent conference:

1. We call on Governments, International agencies and the development community to improve engagement with youth by enhancing consultation between parties to better understand youth priorities.
 - » Youth may identify different priorities to NGOs and governments, which need to be taken into consideration in order to have effective communication and engagement.
2. We call on Governments, International agencies and the development community to develop a policy framework for youth with a definition of youth that takes social age, experience and developmental stage into consideration.
 - » We call on all parties to recognise that youth is a stage of development that builds on the foundations of childhood and therefore requires a long term approach to development.
3. We call on Governments, International agencies and the development community to continue their efforts in ensuring that representation does not replace true participation.
 - » We urge all parties to adopt the World Bank (1994) definition of participatory development as a process in which stakeholders are able to influence decisions which affect them, the DFID-CSO Youth Working Group endorsement of the continuous involvement of youth during the decision making process⁴³ and the principles of its Youth Development Guide.
4. We call on Governments, International agencies and the development community to continue efforts towards ensuring inclusive participation of marginalised and vulnerable young people.
 - » We applaud and encourage continued efforts to remove barriers and factors limiting youth from being involved including; gender, illness or a disability, ethnicity, culture, indigenous status, sexual orientation, socio economic background and religious affiliation.

CONFERENCE EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

A global demographic phenomenon, the 'youth bulge' is increasingly becoming an area of major interest for national governments, international agencies and civil societies. But what is 'the youth bulge'? Why is it an area of interest and what impact will it have on the global community in the near future? How do we use the term 'youth'? Is it based on chronological or social age, experience, or developmental stage?

'Youth' is not simply a category, it is composed of real people each with their own individual needs, dreams, aspirations and challenges. This publication seeks to unpack the term 'youth' and explore some of the surrounding contextual detail to encourage dialogue and begin to explore new perspectives.

This executive summary offers an overview of the material presented at the conference and is then followed by chapters exploring key themes.

Key Note address/ Dr Sharon Bessel (ANU)

Framing the discussion for the day, Dr Bessel explored the concept of youth and raised some crucial questions that resonated for the duration of the conference.

'Youth' is largely a social construct of the developed world, difficult to define and not universally applicable. Every culture, religion and nation has a different understanding of who is a youth, the age range that is covered by the term and the role, status, responsibilities and privileges that accompany it. A focus on chronological age ignores other crucial perspectives such as life experiences, social and cultural norms.

Dr Bessel suggests a more workable approach to the term would be using social age rather than chronological age and applying a life cycle approach that takes into consideration the context and different stages of life. Defining youth in context of culture, life stage and experience is important for forming effective and informed policy.

PLENARY SESSION 1

Youth In Sector Thinking: Where do youth fit in the thoughts of Australia's development sector?

Speakers/ Marc Purcell (ACFID), **Kaye Schoefield** (AusAID), **Ian Wishart** (Plan International Australia)

The focus in the sector is on children up to the age of 18 which leaves youth between the ages of 18 and 25 in a vulnerable position without support once they hit the chronological landmark of 18 years. The challenge is to provide for the needs of youth, which are often cross-sectoral and complex, past the age of 18. To do this, life stages and cultural context need to be taken into consideration rather than focusing on chronological age. The crucial key to successfully working with youth is to take into consideration how they define themselves. The emphasis for the sector should be to enable youth to live a productive life. This should not be confused with standard economic notions of productivity normally associated with paid employment.

CONCURRENT SESSIONS

Child and Youth Participation: Australia

Speakers/ Helen Alexiou (ANU), **Jacqui McKenzie** (AYAC), **Jess Boyden** (Oxfam)

Effective and meaningful engagement and participation for young people is required. Young people need to be recognised as crucial stakeholders on issues and decisions that affect their lives. Currently, they are given little opportunity to do so. Negative stereotypes of youth as materialistic, self centered and ignorant of global issues need to be challenged. Young people are aware of the global issues faced by society but many feel powerless to contribute as traditional methods of social and political activism are seen as ineffective. The will to contribute and participate is there; we need to find new ways that enables young people to do so.

NGO Practice: Case Studies and Approaches

Speakers/ Narelle Bowden-Ford (Australian Lutheran World Service), **KhounKham Inthasone** (ChildFund Laos), **Amalia Fawcett** (Plan International Australia)

Empowering youth begins in childhood. Early child development provides the foundation for building strong skilled youth for the future. But it can't stop there. Early childhood programmes and youth programmes need to coordinate to ensure an individual's development is continuous. Training youth alone will not give them a greater role to play. Communities need to be educated about the importance of youth involvement and participation. One effective method utilised by ChildFund is to focus on sporting activities to offer young people the opportunity to be involved and contribute to their communities.

Health, peace and development

Speakers/ Mia Urbano (Nossal Institute), **Laura Healy** (CLAN), **Geoff Hazel** (Oxfam)

Non-communicable diseases (NCDs), chronic health conditions and reproductive health issues present challenges to social and economic progress. Young people with a chronic illness or disability are often marginalised and discriminated against. They can be perceived as a burden and have limited opportunity to participate, contribute or live a productive life. Like gender issues, health issues pose a challenge for the participation of marginalised youth. Raising awareness, support groups and community education challenge the negative stereotypes associated with illness and disability empowering young people and giving them the opportunity to participate as part of their community. The medical sector focuses on physical symptoms, but the most challenging obstacle for young people with a chronic illness or disability is other people's attitudes.

Workshop: Building a movement of global citizens

Speaker/ Alicia Crawford (The Global Poverty Project)

Globalisation and the increasing interconnectedness of the world through advancements in technology and transportation have created a new society and identity; a global society and a global citizen. People, and especially young people, have a greater awareness of global issues and many have joined movements to end poverty and promote equality of human rights. The Global Poverty Project is one example of the power that awareness raising of global issues can have in bringing about social change. Global issues require global solutions. It is a movement using social solidarity to harness the power, passion and talent of young people as global citizens.

PLENARY SESSION 2

Youth and International Law: Where do youth fit in terms of the human rights framework?

Speakers/ James McDougall (Independent) and **Josh Genner** (Australian Youth Affairs Coalition)

There is a lack of a national youth policy. Australian policy focuses on families and tends to neglect youth issues in favour of other national priorities. At the moment young people are so often left out of the discussions and ignored in the decisions that effect them.

They not only have a right to be a part of those decisions, but are responsible for some of the most powerful answers. Organisations and government bodies, including input from young people in a meaningful, representative and powerful way, are a key part of addressing the challenges we face.

CONCURRENT SESSIONS

Pacific

Speakers/ Kesaya Baba (Victoria University of Wellington), **Patrik Vakaoti** (University of Otago), **Peni Tawake** (AusAID)

Young people need to be seen as today's citizens and not just as tomorrow's future leaders. By confining them to a future role, we are limiting their ability to participate and contribute now which is their right as humans and citizens. Youth so often have others speaking on their behalf that we have rendered them voiceless. In the Pacific, an individual is considered a youth while their parents remain alive which may lead to young people not having a strong role to play in the community. Programmes that train young people to be village leaders empower youth and enable them to be heard and voice their specific needs. With the majority of the population in the Pacific considered as youth, terms such as the 'youth bulge' have a negative connotation and need to be framed in a more positive way. Youth development requires youth participation.

(Left to right) Youth participants at the conference, Keisha and Tuen.



Timor-Leste

Speakers/ Richard Curtain (ANU), Samantha Cooper (Many Hands International)

Employment and education are two key challenges facing youth. With a poor education system and a lack of employment opportunities in Timor-Leste, what role should Australia play? Should Australia provide education and employment opportunities for Timor-Leste youth? If so, how much should Australia undertake to provide? If Australia allowed Timor-Leste youth to study and work here, what would happen to them once their visa expired? Would an education and work experience in Australia necessarily improve chances for Timor-Leste youth in their own country? A complex situation that requires further investigation as to Australia's relations and responsibilities to its neighbours.

Workshop: Disability rights, inclusion and empowerment in education programs

Speakers/ Joanne Webber (CBM)

This workshop explored the inclusion of people with a disability in development and education programs. The concept and definition of disability differs between cultures and nations but some experiences were common among people with a disability: exclusion, discrimination, poverty and abuse. The most effective way to remove the barriers to inclusion are through education and awareness raising in communities as well as empowering people with disabilities to advocate for themselves. Removing physical and environmental barriers alone does not remove social barriers to inclusion in the form of people's attitudes and behaviour. By dispelling myths and misconceptions of people with a disability, social inclusion and empowerment can be achieved to improve the lives of many.

PLENARY SESSION 3

Youth in International thinking and post 2015: How are youth being represented, discussed and categorized by international forums?

Speakers/ Chris Varney (independent), Natasha Butorac (Representative at Youth summit on MDGs), Lauren Burke (UN Youth Delegate)

With 2015 rapidly approaching and targets for the Millenium Development Goals still not completely achieved, the discussion has shifted to future challenges. Gender equality is a key area for youth issues in the international sector. Young women and girls experience things differently and gender needs to be taken into account when developing policies for youth. Education, domestic violence, health issues and opportunities for participation are some of the areas that need to be addressed to improve gender equality. To understand the impact of these issues, young women need to be consulted as they also have potential solutions to the issues. The Model United Nations and UN Women Australia's Youth Representative Panel provide such opportunities for young Australian women to participate and contribute to finding a solution. More consultation with youth is needed to continue progress towards achieving the Global Millenium Development Goals.

REFLECTIONS AND WRAP UP

Facilitators/ Keshia Pieters and Tuen Man Cheung (Plan International Australia), Youth PACT (Planning a Change Today)

Facilitated by two youth from P.A.C.T, the final session of the day concluded with a game of rock, paper and scissors. Attendees were invited to share the three most important things they had learned that day and to come up with three recommendations to how things can be improved, encouraging them to reflect on the information presented and discussions that had occurred.

Mangyan youth in the Philippines enjoying life while developing teamwork and communication skills.



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