

**"WHAT WORKS" SERIES**

# **What Works in Youth Participation: Case Studies from Around the World**

**Edited by Silvia Golombek, Ph.D.**

**Foreword by Rick Little**



**International Youth Foundation®**



## Silvia Golombek, Ph.D.

Silvia Golombek is Vice President of Programs at Youth Service America in Washington, D.C. Previously, she served as Learning Manager at the International Youth Foundation (IYF), where she was responsible for learning and dissemination projects on best practices in youth development programming. Her doctoral dissertation from Johns Hopkins University, "A Sociological Image of the City: Through Children's Eyes," explores children's ideas and concerns about Baltimore and their role as citizens. Silvia used her dissertation findings to create KIDS IN ACTION, a leadership development program that gives children the opportunity, through civic participation, to be decision makers and problem solvers in their communities. Silvia worked for the Esquel Group Foundation's Washington Office, coordinating its Latin American program on children and urban poverty. Prior to joining IYF, she spent six years directing the Congressional Hispanic Caucus Institute's youth leadership development programs in Washington, DC. A native of Argentina, Silvia worked for the Buenos Aires-based Human Settlements Program of the International Institute for Environment and Development, researching multilateral lending projects and regional development issues in developing countries. She is a faculty member of the Johns Hopkins University professional programs, where she teaches courses on the sociology of childhood and youth and on inter-cultural communication.

## International Youth Foundation®

The International Youth Foundation (IYF) was established in 1990 to bring worldwide resources and attention to the many effective local efforts that are transforming young lives across the globe. Currently operating in more than 60 countries, IYF is one of the world's largest public foundations supporting programs that improve the conditions and prospects for young people where they live, learn, work, and play. IYF's "What Works in Youth Development" series examines cutting edge issues in the field and aims to provide practitioners, policymakers, donors, and others supporting youth initiatives with insights into effective practices and innovative approaches impacting young people worldwide.

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**From the beginning, the International Youth Foundation (IYF) has pursued a positive approach to youth development that applies holistic strategies to the complex set of child and youth needs worldwide.**

The majority of the one billion young people, ages 15 to 24, who live on the planet today are leading healthy lives—studying, working, volunteering, and playing positive roles in their communities. Yet all too often, they are portrayed in a negative light. Media headlines emphasize drug and alcohol abuse among youth, teen pregnancy, the rise in youth gangs, or school dropout rates and often leave it at that.

Even when the media's message about youth is positive, it often conveys the idea that youth are "the leaders of tomorrow." As adults, we are encouraged to invest in the young today so that they will have the skills and resources they will need in the future. Such thinking obscures the fact that young people are already making solid contributions to others—tutoring younger children, protecting the environment, starting their own businesses, and leading new initiatives to improve their communities. Yet these contributions are frequently overlooked, with young voices going unheard. Even more regrettably, the vast potential for young people to further contribute to their communities goes largely untapped.

From the beginning, the International Youth Foundation (IYF) has pursued a positive approach to youth development that applies holistic strategies to the complex set of child and youth needs worldwide. This approach recognizes that we need to ensure young people develop the skills, values, and attitudes they need to succeed today, not just tomorrow. It also recognizes that young people are not problems to be solved, but problem solvers themselves. This paradigm emphasizes that youth are assets to the community, and active agents of change who can contribute their energy, idealism, and insights to a community's growth and progress. They are not merely passive recipients of programs and support. That's why IYF emphasizes programs and strategies that promote youth participation in schools, communities, and places of work. And that's why we include youth participation as a key indicator of a youth program's success.

Yet as critical as youth participation is to the notion of positive youth development, it remains a subject that defies easy description. What does youth participation mean in different cultures? What inhibits or encourages youth participation? What attitudes do young people and adults hold when it comes to ensuring young people a greater voice in decision making? How does lack of access to technology hinder youth's ability to participate on a national or global scale? What lessons have we learned from existing youth participation programs worldwide? These are some of the questions explored in this paper.

Through the nine case studies highlighted there, each written by authors of different ages and perspectives, we can begin to see both the challenges and opportunities of engaging young people in meaningful ways in society. We appreciate their

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candor and personal insights, and are grateful to our editor, Dr. Silvia Golombek, who has pulled together such a rich array of on-the-ground experiences and viewpoints from around the globe. And we thank Nokia for its generous financial support of this publication through the Nokia/IYF *Make a Connection* initiative, which promotes a view of young people as leaders making positive contributions in their communities.

It is our hope that this report, like the other IYF *What Works in Youth Development* publications, will be used by policymakers, business leaders, and youth program practitioners to learn more about "what works" in the area of youth engagement, and the critical role youth play in developing civil society, and in a broader sense, democracy itself. We hope it will also strengthen the case for not only recognizing the enormous talents, assets, and contributions of young people, but also ensuring them greater opportunities to make a difference in their communities, and in our world.

Rick R. Little  
Founder and President  
International Youth Foundation



“Children are the future” and “the future belongs to the youth” or even calls to “give youth a voice” are common phrases in popular discourse. Media outlets, political leaders, and children’s advocates often encourage the public to view youth as investments in tomorrow—a time when the young *will* take adults’ place in working, supporting families, and serving their communities. This traditional perspective fails to take into account that in many countries, youth *are* very much active players, contributing to the public good, and having a voice in their communities.



This more current view is captured in language describing youth as “assets,” “active agents of social change,” or “decision-makers,” as well as by individuals who are promoting more democratic, inter-generational relationships through “adult-youth partnerships.” Such concepts can be traced to both a shift in child and youth studies and to the emerging youth development field.

A growing number of social scientists in the United Kingdom, Scandinavia, and the United States, for example, are questioning developmental psychology models that favor the view of the young “as persons in the making.” Instead, they support perspectives that incorporate youth as protagonists who by going to school, working, being members of families, having friendships, and making choices, are very much a part of the social process. Children and youth’s maturity level is a biological fact of life, these researchers argue, but the ways in which this maturity level is interpreted, and the rights or restrictions allowed or imposed on the young are a matter of adult choices and the socio-cultural context. Studies applying this perspective, therefore, view the young as active social agents to be understood in their

own right, and focus on what youth *can* do, rather than what they *cannot* or *are not allowed* to do until they grow up.<sup>1</sup>

From the programming and service side, youth development frameworks are also moving away from deficit models, valuing instead young people for their potential, and designing interventions to build a set of core competencies needed to participate successfully as adolescents and adults. This approach considers young people through a more holistic lens, addressing the broad range of their social, moral, emotional, physical, and cognitive competencies. The International Youth Foundation’s “5 Cs” model of desired outcomes for effective programs reflects precisely that competency-building principle:

<sup>1</sup>Allison and Alan Prout, eds. (1990) *Constructing and Reconstructing Childhood: Contemporary Issues in the Sociological Study of Childhood*, New York: The Falmer Press



- *Character:* Youth acquire a sense of responsibility and accountability, the ability to thrive despite adversity
- *Confidence:* Young people develop a sense of self-worth based on their ability to make choices and take the initiative
- *Connection:* Young people develop a positive sense of belonging to their community, to caring adults, and to their peers
- *Competence:* Youth are enabled to master sound educational and vocational skills to earn a living
- *Contribution:* Youth become civically minded and wish to contribute their time, ideas, and talents to better their communities

If we focus specifically on the final "C"—contribution—we find that the youth development perspective views it both as an input and a desired outcome of effective youth programs. Over the years, we have seen that through opportunities to participate in a community's affairs, young people gain self esteem, confidence, and essential life skills such as decision making, conflict management, teamwork, and the ability to work in diverse environments. As they build these competencies, youth begin to think of themselves as partners and stakeholders in society. They also acquire a sense of responsibility for the common good, and internalize a positive attitude toward active citizenship. A specific example of how contribution is incorporated into youth development programs is found in prevention efforts, for example those involving drug, tobacco, or alcohol abuse—where youth involvement is a key strategy. Such an inclusion strategy helps to shift the responsibility for preventing problems away from professionals and agencies to the youth themselves becoming responsible for decisions that affect their lives.

A public recognition of young people as key players in the social process has been strengthened through the United Nations' Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), the most widely ratified international agreement, which affirms the right to participation for all people up to 18 years of age. By stating that "all children have a right to express their views and to have them taken into account in all matters that affect them," the document recognizes youth participation as an integral element in a community's life.

There are multiple ways in which such involvement occurs: young people volunteering in environmental projects; offering their views on community issues; participating in student governments; serving as program evaluators or as members of advisory boards; becoming peer mentors; serving as members of youth committees in local governments or in international youth forums. In sum, the Convention recognizes the status of a young person as "a subject of rights, who

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is able to form and express opinions, to participate in decision-making processes and influence who is able to form and express opinions, to participate in decision-making processes and influence solutions, to intervene in the process of social change and in the building of democracy."<sup>2</sup>

Youth participation acquires particular significance in democracy-building initiatives. When lack of confidence and apathy toward political processes is increasing worldwide, it is the new generation who must be educated about how to build a strong democracy. But active citizenship cannot be expected to happen overnight when a person reaches voting age: it must be learned "by doing" through everyday experiences: opportunities to participate in shared decision-making, listening to different opinions, weighing options and consequences. These are individual skills that help build civil society and young people's commitment to the democratic process.

Encouraging young people to become involved is even more crucial in regions where there is little or no tradition of democratic forms of government. In such cases, it is essential to teach the young about electoral systems and the potential of individuals to create the democratic process. In these countries, change often starts in schools, shifting the way teachers relate to their students from authoritarian to more democratic relationships, and encouraging students' creativity and critical thinking.

As these examples indicate, youth participation cannot be described as a single type of project, but rather as a program strategy, even a public attitude that encourages youth to express their opinions, to become involved, and to be part of the decision-making process at different levels. In his article entitled "Childhood: A Global Journal of Child Research," Jeremy Roche describes participation as "being counted as a member of the community; it is about governing and being governed."<sup>3</sup>

In that sense, many youth around the world are "governing," exercising their rights, voicing their ideas, influencing decisions, and improving the lives of others. Sometimes they are pushed to participate in their community's affairs by need and extreme circumstances, or by their own vision and personal motivation. Sometimes, they are encouraged to become involved by committed adults and organizations that believe that truly inclusive societies cannot leave out the young. However, obstacles to young people's engagement arise in many forms. They include cultural norms that still favor hierarchical relationships between the old and the young; economic circumstances that prevent youth from participating in other than income-generating activities; lack of access to information as an empowering tool for participation; or adults' and youths' mindsets fixed on

<sup>2</sup>Santos Pais, Maria (2000) in *The Political Participation of Children*; Rakesh Rajani (ed.) Harvard Center for Population and Development Studies; Harvard School of Public Health

<sup>3</sup>Roche, Jeremy (1999) *Children: Rights, Participation and Citizenship*, in *Childhood: A Global Journal of Child Research*; Vol. 6:4, pp.475-493

"ageism", which are judgmental attitudes between generations based on age.

What are some of the lessons emerging from these experiences? What enables youth participation? What inhibits it? In *What Works in Youth Participation: Case Studies Around the World*, we ask these questions, and explore the complex issues of youth participation through nine case studies. While the chapters were written by a wide range of authors who expressed different perspectives and touch on different

aspects of the issue, they were all asked to candidly discuss their achievements and challenges in making youth participation work. All of them committed to providing their own personal reflections on the issue, as well as examples of opportunities and challenges for youth engagement in programs and organizations; youth influencing political spheres; and organizational efforts to mainstream youth participation in social structures and institutions.

The case studies selected for this publication are very diverse. Some were written by youth and some by adults, each retaining their own style and worldview. They reflect different national situations as well as their authors' personal concerns and aspirations. All, however, share the same commitment to creating more inclusive and democratic societies, by working effectively at the local, national, and international levels.

We purposefully decided not to list the authors' ages, although this is common practice in publications with youth-written content. While on the one hand, providing young people's ages highlights the magnitude of their accomplishments despite their age, the practice also reinforces the tendency towards ageism, a key component in arguments against young people's engagement. What we hope to stress, therefore, is that talents and ideas are not a matter of age, but a matter of motivation and opportunity. Readers will be able to discern the general age of the authors both by the content of the article and by the brief biography that describes each author's background.

Please note that the case studies from India, Philippines, and Thailand were originally presented at IYF's Asian Regional Meeting on Youth Participation (Manila, August 2001). That meeting offered IYF's Asian Partners and youth leaders with whom they work a forum to learn new skills together, and to discuss key factors that enable or discourage youth participation at different levels, from





individual attitudes and organizational frameworks to broad social structures.

We have also included two case studies, one from Argentina and one from Colombia, presented at the Seminario Latinoamericano: "Protagonismo Social Juvenil: de Beneficiarios Jóvenes a Jóvenes Protagonistas (Latin American Seminar: "Youth Social Protagonism: from Young Beneficiaries to Protagonist Youth") organized by Fundación Sustentabilidad, Educación, Solidaridad (SES), an IYF partner in Argentina. This meeting, held in November 2001 in Buenos Aires, was attended by several of IYF's Latin American Partners and representatives

from other youth organizations. It addressed the issue of youth participation in the region's changing political and economic context, which tends to marginalize large sectors of the population, especially young people.

In addition, the report includes contributions from individuals connected directly to IYF's programs and projects: a case study on the situation in the Balkans by the executive director of IYF's partner in that region; a piece on Youth Service America (a program in IYF's YouthNet International database of effective programs from around the world); and a report by two young leaders, one from Brazil, and one from Germany, who are members of the task force which collaborates with IYF on its youth leadership website, YouthActionNet.org.

*What Works in Youth Participation: Case Studies from Around the World* begins with Oliver Tayo's brief but poignant reflection on the dilemmas he faces as a practitioner in the Philippines when seeking to increase youth participation. His candid comments lay out some of the most important questions and challenges surrounding the issue, and which, from different perspectives, are also addressed in the articles that follow.

Youth activism and what draws individual young people to engage in their communities is the topic of the next section. Worawut (Pan) Ngampiboolwet from Thailand and Rui Mesquita from Brazil reflect on their participation experiences as part of their own development, and call on other youth to become involved.

Jaya Iyer from India and Sergio Sánchez, Rosa Alba Schroeder, and Susana Lamela from Argentina, address important issues in programs that incorporate youth participation as their key strategy and focus, especially the challenges and growth that both adults and youth experience when working together.

The next section presents the perspective of youth engaged in influencing the political process. Thomas Busch discusses his experience in creating a local youth council in Germany, and Adriana Benjumea explores options for youth engagement in her war-torn country of Colombia.

The final articles present two very different approaches to incorporating youth as active social change agents. Michael McCabe from the United States presents his organization's efforts to make service and participation the expected and common experience of American youth, while Agon Demjaha from Macedonia explores both the potential and the challenges of engaging youth as citizens in the new democracies in the Balkans.<sup>4</sup>

In the concluding section, we draw general lessons from the cases presented, and explore the next stages of youth participation. Examples include how communications technology, which breaks down geographic and cultural boundaries, can more fully engage youth in international efforts, enabling them to share tools and ideas, and indeed become global citizens. In fact, making those connections, and linking people and organizations engaged in sustainable, effective youth participation programs with others in the field, is the key to making progress in this challenging area.

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<sup>4</sup>We had hoped to include a case study from Africa, but were not able to do so by the time this publication went to press. The fact that there is no article from that region should not be interpreted as a lack of programs or efforts in the area of youth participation.



## **Introduction**

As practitioners, are we doing everything we can to truly engage youth in substantive action and decision-making? What different agendas are at play when youth are actively involved in programs? Are we engaging all youth, or only those who are easier to reach?

Oliver Tayo, who works on reproductive health education programs with Filipino youth, asks some hard questions. Through his own reflections on the challenges he faces as a practitioner, he brings to the forefront issues that sometimes remain hidden or ignored in youth participation discussions, but which need to be addressed if we are to understand the full implications of real youth involvement.

## An Adult's Dilemma on Youth Participation

by Oliver Tayo

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**Unless we adults develop a major paradigm shift in how we view children and youth, it will be very difficult to create a conducive environment at home and in school for young people to participate.**

Discussions about youth participation bring back childhood memories of what in the Philippines is called *sating pusa*—a person who tags along. I remember my older siblings letting me and other younger kids join their game as *sating pusa*. This means that we were allowed to play with them but we could not be the "it" because we were too young and therefore at a disadvantage to play such a primary role in the game. Being a *sating pusa* is like being a player and yet not really being part of the game.

Now, as an adult working with children and adolescents, I am still confronted with the concept of *sating pusa*. Am I really involving these youth in ways that are meaningful and relevant? Do I provide significant opportunities for them to be active players? Do I contribute to the creation of a conducive environment for them to participate? Or do I just involve them because this is what funding agencies would like to see? Are they merely *sating pusa*? These are some of the questions that preoccupy my mind whenever I am involved in an activity that requires youth participation.

Youth participation had already taken a big leap forward in the Philippines since the global community took notice of the critical role that youth have been playing in social developments. Two massive non-violent demonstrations in 2001 in the Philippines, known as EDSA II and EDSA III,<sup>5</sup> reflect the high level of youth's awareness regarding their right to participate. However, these two phenomena are also a manifestation of how youth participation greatly differs between social classes. A clear example of this difference is the communication channels available for each group. While upper class and middle class youth exchanged text messages to recruit participants and arrange where to meet to express their sentiments on EDSA II, poor urban youth relied on "word of mouth" and even alleged financial motivation.

While it is true that advancement in information and communication technology has reinforced the sense of participation of children and adolescents in decision-making processes, it is mostly true among those who have access to these technologies. For the 5.5 million out-of-school youth, ages 15 to 24, who have no or minimum access to education, information, or technology, encouraging participation is extremely difficult. Given this situation, I face another dilemma. Which will really matter most: securing the participation of twenty in-school

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<sup>5</sup>EDSA II was a massive non-violent demonstration in Manila in January 2001 to demand the resignation of President Joseph Estrada. EDSA III was a protest held in April 2001 by ousted President Estrada's supporters.



youth where the process of facilitating participation is expected to be easier, or getting five to ten out-of-school youth to participate through a process which may be more difficult and less likely to achieve a desired result?

Youth participation becomes even more difficult if the organization and its people have a certain culture or work within a system that is prejudiced against participation. For instance, if the organization is operating within an autocratic and traditional style of leadership or management, if the staff are not given enough latitude for freedom of speech, if the office structure tends to divide or isolate people, if office policies and practices undermine the concept of participation, then youth participation is not expected to flourish. It is hard to preach something one does not practice.

At the same time, young people's sense of participation is developed at home and in school. Unless we adults develop a major paradigm shift in how we view children and youth, it will be very difficult to create a conducive environment at home and in school for young people to participate. And unless we develop a new generation of youth who value participation, we can expect a generation of *sating pusa* in the years to come.

*Oliver Tayo works with the Kabalikat ng Pamilyang Pilipino Foundation's HIV/AIDS and reproductive health program, which addresses the concerns of in-school and out-of-school youth. He completed his Bachelor of Arts degree in Communication Research at the University of the Philippines, and has worked with different NGOs on health education, service provision, and advocacy.*

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## Introduction

Authors like John Gardner, Warren Bennis, and Jean Lipman-Blumen, who have researched the concept of leadership, have identified a number of characteristics that are present in individuals who fit commonly accepted descriptions of leaders. Among these traits are:

- a guiding vision and persistence in the face of setbacks or failures
- eagerness to accept responsibilities when no one else will
- a capacity to motivate that moves people to action
- an ability to earn people's trust
- curiosity and desire to learn
- deep passion for an issue and for life's promises
- a sense of broad-based democratic community<sup>6</sup>

Classic leadership texts typically research adult, well-established figures in leadership positions. Rarely do they analyze young leaders, especially youth who are not publicly recognized, but who are engaged in creating social change in their communities. The two articles in this section offer a glimpse into the issue of youth leadership as seen by the youth themselves. What we learn is that the same characteristics researchers identify in established adult leaders are found in these younger activists, confirming the notion that leadership, vision, and even the capacity to make a difference are not necessarily a question of age.

<sup>6</sup> Gardner, John (1990) *On Leadership*, New York: Free Press; Bennis, Warren, (1994) *On Becoming a Leader*, New York: Addison-Wesley; Lipman-Blumen (1996) *The Connective Edge: Leading in an Interdependent World*, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers.

# From Brazil: A Young Activist's Road to Social Action

By Rui Mesquita

*"There's nothing you can make that can't be made,  
No one you can save that can't be saved,  
Nothing you can do, but you can learn how to be you in time,  
It's easy..."*

These words were immortalized by John Lennon in the Beatles' song, "All You Need Is Love," and it is one of my greatest beliefs concerning the human condition. Unfortunately, not too many of us can actually feel and understand the depth of these words. But if you are young, you know it is easier to absorb their meaning and move from words to deeds.

That summarizes how I personally have been working to make my world a better place to live in peace and solidarity. My social activism journey began in 1995, when I was 18 years old and entered the University of Pernambuco<sup>7</sup> (UPE) in northeast Brazil to study Business Administration. Only six months after beginning classes, I made a trip to Brasília, the national capital, to attend a student conference sponsored by UNE,<sup>8</sup> the Student National Union in Brazil. During this conference, I learned about the students' many demands, and realized how complicated it is to organize young people around ideas, and move people from words to action, when they are arguing among themselves. In other words, I realized the strange behavior of human beings, who are aggressive for almost no reason, especially when they only focus on their local and isolated context, instead of considering the world outside their own.

Much happened in my life after that. It was amazing to be elected President of FENEAD,<sup>9</sup> the National Business Students Federation in Brazil, in July 1997. During that period I traveled all over Brazil, from the Amazon area in the extreme north to the Pampas area in the south, contacting many young people and learning about their needs. At FENEAD, I started to develop ideas and ideals to encourage young people to undertake social projects all over the country, especially grassroots projects on a volunteer basis.

While at FENEAD, I decided to concentrate my studies in the field of non-profit management, and became the only student at UPE focusing on that field. During my last year of studies, I felt the need to keep working on social projects, especially empowering young people to create a different future for themselves and their community, somehow opening their minds up to a better understanding of

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<sup>7</sup> Universidade de Pernambuco (UPE) - Recife, PE Brazil - [www.upe.br](http://www.upe.br)

<sup>8</sup> UNE - União Nacional dos Estudantes - [www.une.org.br](http://www.une.org.br)

<sup>9</sup> FENEAD - Federação Nacional de Estudantes de Administração - [www.fenead.org.br](http://www.fenead.org.br)

the world and its variety. That was when I met Romel Pinheiro, another UPE student with similar ideas. Together, we created a nonprofit organization in 1998 called Social Development Academy Institute,<sup>10</sup> which seeks to empower youth to undertake and lead social projects.

The Academy Institute works as a social incubator for youth-led ideas and solutions. Six young people formed its board of directors. New opportunities arose for me during the development of the Academy Institute, and I was invited to be the Executive Coordinator of the Volunteer Center of Recife<sup>11</sup> (which in English means "reef"). The Center's goal was to promote volunteerism.

Founded in 1997, the Volunteer Center of Recife is a nonprofit organization working to increase the culture of volunteerism in the metropolitan area of Recife, providing nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and community-based organizations with volunteers for their social, cultural, and environmental projects. Located in the Brazilian Northeast Region, Recife is the capital city of the state of Pernambuco (PE). With a population of 1.4 million inhabitants in its municipal area and 3.3 million in its metropolitan area, Recife is a city with many social problems, like many big cities in Brazil, and has a low level of volunteerism.

Our first task at the Volunteer Center was to develop work methodologies, which did not exist. We planned to provide other nonprofit organizations undertaking social, cultural or environmental projects with volunteers, but not before offering their staff a training course on the "Planning and Management of Volunteer Programs." We also planned to register people who wanted to volunteer in one of the assisted organizations. Volunteer candidates would need to pass an introductory workshop on volunteerism to clarify their doubts, and to help volunteers themselves understand the modern concept of volunteerism.

After three months of preparation, we officially launched our activities in February 2000, starting a pilot project to test our methods. This pilot project included nine selected organizations (seven NGOs and two public schools)—all local and community based. We also launched our web site ([www.voluntario.org.br](http://www.voluntario.org.br)), which during its first week registered over 150 people wanting to volunteer for the pilot project, reflecting the potential supply of volunteers in the region.

After almost two years of intensive work, the Volunteer Center is now working with over 60 NGOs based in the Recife metropolitan area, and over 2,500 volunteers. But we still feel that our work is just beginning, measured against the huge social problems faced by this region.

When we began in late 1999, there were four of us on the team at the Volunteer Center, and at 22 years old, I was the youngest. The other members

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<sup>10</sup>Instituto Academia de Desenvolvimento Social - [www.academiasocial.org.br](http://www.academiasocial.org.br)

<sup>11</sup>Recife Voluntário, the Volunteer Center of Recife - [www.voluntario.org.br](http://www.voluntario.org.br)

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were 38, 58, and 60 years old. Two years later, we are five, and I am no longer the youngest. While I am 24, the other members are 18, 25, 26, and 40. Age is not an issue we care about: everyone is young once, and some of us are young longer than others.

Looking back, I still have problems being a young activist in Brazil, because many older people still do not believe how important, serious, and competent youth can be. But I do believe that young people need to be participating more effectively in both drafting the means and implementing the solutions to social problems. Young people participating and exercising responsibility is essential not only because they will be the beneficiaries and the leaders in the future but also because so many of them are already playing decisive roles within their own communities.

If you are a young person, in age or spirit, I invite you to start reflecting on your own role in the world, and to make it a world without geographic or psychological boundaries for action, where you can act and be present everywhere, from the local to the global level, on the issues that you care about. As John Lennon once said, "I hope someday you'll join us, and the world will be as one."

*Rui Mesquita is the executive director and a founding member of Recife Voluntário (the Volunteer Center of Recife), which promotes youth volunteering and currently includes over 800 individual volunteers involved in local projects. A passionate promoter of civil society, Rui created the Social Development Academy Institute in 1999, which uses the Internet to disseminate methods and ideas for the development of social, environmental, cultural, and educational projects. Through his involvement in both the national Brazilian Youth Workshop Network and the International Youth Parliament 2000, Rui has had the opportunity to translate local initiatives into global action. He is a member of the IYF YouthActionNet Task Force.*

## Pan's Story

by Worawut (Pan) Ngampiboolwet

I have been involved in a campaign for children's rights for some time now, to advocate for my own rights as a young person and for the rights of other children and youth today and in the future. I firmly believe that every young person has the basic right to survive, to be educated, to receive health care, and to participate in the social process.

These are the rights that young people should have, but in reality, they do not. Of the different rights established by the UN's Convention on the Rights of the Child, I have been focusing my advocacy work primarily on the right to participation because I want every young person to be able to collaborate with adults in solving problems affecting them. Such problems include inadequate education, sexual abuse, discrimination, environmental degradation, community disintegration, as well as economic crisis. All these issues affect young people as much as they affect adults. Therefore, youth should have some say in solving these problems, or at least understand the root causes so that we can make informed decisions and contribute to the solutions.

I have had more opportunities than others to become involved in civic actions because I have been trained in environmental protection, child rights, and drug and HIV/AIDS prevention. Another factor that gives me a unique perspective is that I live my life close to the land. My family members are farmers, with their own economic challenges. Through these life experiences, I have direct knowledge about social problems, and above all I hope to bring a smile to the faces of young people everywhere.

There are several factors that have given me more opportunities to be involved. I will start with myself: What I do, my ideas, what I communicate to others, everything has a focus—to bring about positive community change. I was born in a poor and unhappy family, so my goal is to enable other young people, whether I know them or not, to have what I did not have, so they can have a life different than mine. Our development depends on how we are cared for. Therefore a caring and loving family is at the heart of who we will become.

In spite of, or possibly because of, its shortcomings, I consider my family a factor that encourages me to be more active than other young people. Although I have brothers and sisters, I seldom spend time with them because I live with my uncle and aunt. I have learned a lot on my own and have been exposed to wider and sometimes strange experiences which made me lose important parts of my childhood.

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**These children have to develop a shield so that they are emotionally immune. Otherwise, it is easy for them to become aggressive and angry. I am determined to talk about them and let our society realize that this is not what these children want to do.**

My family situation has taught me to fight for life, to know how to work, to recognize loneliness, and to accept the lack of warmth and loving care as a reality I have to deal with. The only time I received attention from my family was when I did something wrong such as using drugs. But I was lucky. I managed to quit, and my ability to overcome drug abuse also leads me to help other young people going through similar situations.

When father's day or mother's day comes, and the school invites parents, I hide in the restroom or sneak out of school. When I see a child with his or her parents, I feel envious and happy for the child at the same time. But when I see a child crying alone, I become angry with the parents for their negligence and lack of love. The situation reflects my own family's condition as well as the picture of Thai society where some parents do not take care of their children. Some children are abandoned by their parents. Although these children are in institutions where they are looked after and kind strangers visit them, the attention is only temporary. They will soon be left alone again. These children have to develop a shield so that they are emotionally immune. Otherwise, it is easy for them to become aggressive and angry. I am determined to talk about them and let our society realize that this is not what these children want to do. They are only seeking help, asking for something that their families are unable to give them. I have participated in many campaigns to make sure that adults know what has happened to us.

At school, a special teacher and my friends have also given me the energy and will to participate. Ms. Aeumporn is the only one to see through me and discover my potential. She gives me strength and opens up opportunities for me to develop myself through training and other activities. She loves nature and our local community and has transferred this love to me. I have become a nature lover like her.

My friends encourage me to seek opportunities to become involved in social activities. There is a saying: "you will become like the friends you are with." My friends are caring and I have learned much from them. They encourage me when I am desperate, when I have nothing.

The social environment itself stimulates my desire to participate in the problem-solving process that helps make this a better society. The environment and society in general have greatly deteriorated—from rivers and forests to the human mind. It is as if worms were eating away what we have accomplished. Our nation is becoming bankrupt because many people are selfish and believe that money and power will hold our society together. I think however, that it is unity, affection, kindness, love, honesty, and selflessness that lead to happiness and sustain our environment. There are those of us who do not understand that protecting the

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natural environment is essential to a society's sustainability, so they destroy it. Some new technologies, thought to help preserve the environment, may bring long term destruction to nature instead, such as cloning or genetic engineering. These are my ideas and others may not agree with them, but I present them to generate discussions and debates and to motivate people to work to improve our society and our environment.

I would not be able to communicate my thoughts to others and participate in campaigns on the issues that are important to me if I did not have strong support from many organizations, such as the National Youth Bureau, the National Council for Child and Youth Development, the Grandma and Grandpa Youth Group, and other NGOs which work in the field of child and youth development and environmental protection. They give me encouragement and financial and technical support—sponsoring my participation in several local and national platforms, providing skills training, and giving me the opportunity to broaden my perspectives and experiences. All of this helps me to convey my ideas and tell adults to give other young people the same chances that I have had to express themselves and contribute to the solution of society's problems.

I am concerned about national problems, both current and future. Just knowing about these issues leads me to want to relay my ideas to others and to create a youth movement to propose our recommendations to the government. If a country or a society is not informed about its problems, people will not be enthusiastic or cooperate in solving them. It is just like if you do not suffer, you will not appreciate happiness. But we know that we have national problems—poverty, drugs, HIV/AIDS.

In the future, however, I think one phenomenon will become an even bigger problem for Thailand. Current plans to solve problems and to prevent future negative trends have not been developed within the Thai context. Our plans have always been very passive, and follow the path of developed countries. We are quick to import and impose technologies that have been developed abroad without the proper preparation and training to adapt them to the local context. Why do we not make an effort to be proactive as Asian countries? Why do we have to follow in other countries' footsteps? Our country has a wealth of resources that can make us a leader in this region. I search for every opportunity to participate by contributing my ideas to the national political process to determine our future directions.

These are the factors that strongly stimulate my desire to become involved in the social process and to participate in issues affecting my life and the lives of all young people. Open-minded adults and child and youth organizations give me

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opportunities and encourage me to explore them. However, there are still many people who close their eyes and their hearts and cannot accept young people's abilities and ideas. They think a child is just a child, but a child has things to offer that an adult does not have.

*Since he was 13, Worawut Ngampiboolwet (Pan) has been active in promoting child rights and environmental protection issues. In 1999 he was chosen by the National Youth Bureau to participate in the Child Rights Awareness Program, along with 30 other Thai youth. He attended the national youth platforms organized by the National Council for Youth Development in 1998 and 2000, and the national level youth conference to review Thailand's end-decade goals. Pan is a first year student at Sampathong Technical College.*





## Introduction

"Community Youth Development," according to authors Della Hughes and Susan Curnan, "assumes the involvement of young people in their own development and that of the community, in partnership with adults, to make use of their talents and increase their investment in community life."<sup>12</sup> The concept of community youth development thus moves the youth participation debate forward, encouraging practitioners to think not only about how giving young people opportunities to participate enhances their personal development, but also that youth themselves play essential roles in building community. Hughes and Curnan point out that "as a society, however, we have been working on young people rather than with them." Adult/youth partnerships, therefore, become a key part of the community youth development equation.

However, the notion of adults and youth working together implies a change in the power relationship between generations that entails major adjustments from the traditional ways in which adults and youth in many societies relate to each other. A study by Linda Camino on diverse initiatives in the United States that were implementing youth/adult partnerships<sup>13</sup> found that such a strategy requires a change in principles and values (resolving underlying and conflicting beliefs on the allocation of authority); the development of new skills, especially in the areas of communication, teamwork, and coaching; and a major emphasis on cooperative rather than competitive behavior.

This topic is addressed by the articles in this section, which present two adult perspectives on what it takes to make youth participation work.

Using her own youth program as an example, Jaya Iyer addresses some of the key conflicts adults and youth must overcome to work together. These conflicts often arise from differences in learning and working styles, in time management, and in priorities. The author addresses key attitudinal conflicts that adults and youth must overcome and shares examples of how her program has worked with adults to change their views of the young.

In "Giving a Meaning to School," Sanchez, Schroeder, and Lamela present a service-learning program, introduced in a school on the outskirts of Buenos Aires, aimed at combatting students' loss of interest or the curricula and teachers' powerlessness to challenge outdated educational practices. Among the most important lessons learned were the discovery of the community as an extension of the classroom and a new-found mutual respect between teachers and youth.

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<sup>12</sup> Hughes, Della and Susan Curnan (2000), *Community Youth Development: A Framework for Action*, *CYD Journal*, vol.1:1, pp. 7-11

<sup>13</sup> Camino, Linda (2000), *Youth-Adult Partnerships: Entering New Territory in Community Work and Research*, *Applied Developmental Science*, Vol. 4, suppl. 1, pp. 11-20

## Making it Work: Pravah's Experience in Working with Young People

by Jaya Iyer

Pravah is a nonprofit organization founded in India in 1993 by a group of young professionals seeking to make a difference in social issues. Its vision is to enable youth to become leaders for social change by facilitating their participation in effective decision making. Presently we are working with about 30 schools and 25 colleges reaching out to more than 5,000 young people every year.

Pravah means *the flow*, and to us symbolizes the interconnecting flow between diverse views, organizations and peoples, between the corporate and development sectors, government and civil societies, poor and rich, men and women, youth and adults. Pravah was founded when tensions between two religious communities were raging across India. Some concerned individuals working in diverse fields were appalled at the degree of apathy prevalent amongst their own colleagues and friends. People who by any conventional standards would be considered successful and sensitive were either totally indifferent or nursed negative emotions and unfounded myths about the 'other' community. This complete lack of understanding of social realities and warped worldviews prompted these concerned individuals to examine the root cause of these problems. One of the critical reasons identified was the gap in the formal education system. While this system places much emphasis on academic performance, very little effort is made to connect the learnings to real life situations. The intellectual and cognitive abilities of the student are strengthened, but other facets like interpersonal skills, sensitivity, and initiative, are more or less ignored.

Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) often intervene in situations where social conditions have deteriorated and the available resources cannot bring about lasting positive change. Instead of trying to cure social crises, Pravah members believe we need to build a society capable of 'preventing' these breakdowns altogether. We believe that this can be accomplished by influencing future decision makers, such as youth, and enabling them to make socially responsible decisions.

It was for this purpose that Pravah was established as a registered nonprofit. Its founders were a group of young professionals coming from such diverse backgrounds as human resource development, theater, psychology, and the

social sciences. These individuals strongly believed that youth have the maximum potential to bring about changes in society. Pravah seeks to meet this goal and reach out to youth through educational institutions, thereby creating a large base of sensitive, well-informed people who can contribute to society in different ways. We offer a range of programs to students and young adults. They include social skills development and sensitization to social issues, as well as opportunities to participate in volunteer efforts through debates, theatre, music and creative writing, simulation games, and adventure activities.

Working with young people has been challenging and rewarding at the same time. It requires immense patience and unwavering trust and energy, but on the other hand, the experience offers enormous satisfaction, and reenergizes and reestablishes one's faith in the future.

Some of the issues we have faced as adults and which young people working with us have shared are listed in the following pages. We believe that these apply to others working with young people. Adults as well as young people approach the relationship with a certain degree of caution because there are several preconceived notions about each other that could result in conflicts. The following table summarizes these conflicting perceptions.

<b>According to adults, youth...</b>	<b>According to youth, adults are...</b>
■ Lack commitment	■ Too demanding
■ Are self absorbed	■ Unwilling to give personal space
■ Are undisciplined	■ Regimentalists
■ Are not interested in long term plans	■ Oblivious to here and now realities
■ Are temperamental/whimsical	■ Not interested in the emotional aspects
■ Lack experience	■ Not ready to give chances
■ Only want to have fun	■ Straight-jacketed and boring

We accept that there is some truth in what both parties have to say. After all, this is how they see the other in more conventional settings like school and family. However, we believe that it is possible to work around these perceptions if we as a team of adults take on the onus of taking the first step. In the process, we must also ensure that the youth also change their stances, attitudes, and behavior.

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The following sections illustrate ways we have overcome conflicts at Pravah.

**Assumption No. 1**  
**Youth lack commitment vs Adults are too demanding**

Adults often expect young people to feel committed to something that adults have conceived. Young people are thus expected to participate in activities without having been involved in the decision-making process. Adults have made decisions and expect the younger ones to be as enthused as they are. But instead, young people find the situation stifling because even if they do believe in the overall idea there is no space

for them, and their individuality is not recognized.

At Pravah, we constantly strive to involve young people in the process of decision making. For example, every year we bring together a group of students to conduct research on an issue of social concern. We share with them options for research, but the group members make the final decisions about the issue and methodology. We also equip them with skills required for decision making and consensus building. We then keep track of their progress, intervening only when required, but assuring them of our assistance whenever they need it.

Last year our research team did a study on the quality of drinking water supplied in Delhi. The team consisted of undergraduate college students who had decided on the topic of the research and methodology. They worked hard together as a team for several months, underwent requisite training, and finally produced an impeccable report.

**Assumption No. 2**  
**Youth are self absorbed vs Adults refuse to give personal space**

We understand that adolescents and youth are still growing and are in their formative phase of life. While one may argue that learning is a lifelong process, it is much more pronounced in the early part of life, when young people are learning and discovering themselves and preparing for life ahead. A young person thus tends to be more self absorbed than an older person.

Recognizing this legitimate need of youth to experience and learn, we strongly feel that any task that a young person is involved in should offer him/her sufficient opportunities for self-development and learning and plenty of new experiences.



Our college program is designed to provide opportunities for volunteerism and exposure to social realities. We place students with grassroots organizations working in rural communities. This is done during college vacations for a period of three to six weeks. While we encourage students to take on projects with the host organization, plenty of space and time is allowed for explorations, reflections, and doing things on their own. Our experience shows clearly that maximum learning happens during this unstructured period placed strategically between structured activities.

Even during our orientation program, much emphasis is placed on self-development. Self-discovery and disclosures are the first sessions followed by skills like teamwork and communications. Some time out of every day is clearly marked for reflection.

**Assumption No. 3  
Youth lack commitment vs Adults are too demanding**

As with the first assumption, when youth are not involved in the process of decision making, conflicts are bound to arise. Here, decisions are about rules and regulations that the group should follow. The adult members often thrust a set of rules on the young people. If, however, a process of consensus building is adopted from the beginning about the code of conduct and these are revisited from time to time, then conflicts are easier to deal with.

In our school program, called Making Change Makers, students participate in a series of workshops culminating in an action program on an issue of social concern. In the first interaction with the students, we invite them to draw out a set of rules that would be applicable to all of us, the adults and the young people. To their suggestions we add a few of our own, but only after a consensus is built. This democratic process truly empowers them and also ensures that they behave in a responsible manner. It also forces adults to behave more responsibly and sensitively. If there is a breach of conduct, it is easier to deal with because the entire group builds pressure on the concerned individual to behave differently.

**Assumption No. 4  
Youth not interested in long-term plans vs Adults are oblivious to here and now realities**

Adults often find it difficult to deal with young people's "here and now" attitude and young people find it difficult to relate to adults' obsession with tomorrow. This is because adults tend to involve youth only in activities and tasks and not in the visioning and planning processes. Work is delegated without sharing the vision behind the whole exercise.

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**It is important to remind ourselves that youth are seeking new experiences and learnings, and that their experiencing mode makes them much more "here and now" people.**

If youth are involved in envisioning and planning from stage one, it is easier for them to relate to long-term plans. Sometimes adults act as wet blankets when younger people share their "great dreams"—which might look too idealistic for the die-hard pragmatist adult. Fresh dreams, however, are a critical resource that only the young (and young at heart) can dream. They are the life water of hope sometimes missing in the older generation. It might take a good deal of energy and time to help turn these hazy dreams into achievable goals, but it is worth it, as these experiences are rewarding in more ways than one.

It is important to remind ourselves that youth are seeking new experiences and learnings, and that their experiencing mode makes them much more "here and now" people. Thus constant follow up is needed to ensure that things are moving generally in the right direction. In one of our programs, "FUN Camps," an experiential learning module for school students from urban centers, we take young participants to organizations working with rural communities. School students are often startled to see the abject poverty and inhuman conditions that prevail in rural India. They want to do something "here and now." Sometimes it can be as simple as buying cartons of biscuits for hungry children or giving a lecture on hygiene at the school. Respecting their emotions and acknowledging their good intentions, we involve the students in some brainstorming and planning. The scope of these discussions can range from the parameters of development to equitable distribution of resources. Often amazing learnings and plans emerge out of these discussions. It may be a change in someone's personal attitude and behavior, a plan to raise funds to install a tube well, or the sale of products from the organization at the school fair. The plan to distribute biscuits might still take place, only now it is not seen as charity but as the sharing and celebrating of a long-standing relationship.

**Assumption No. 5  
Youth as temperamental and/or whimsical vs Adults not interested in the emotional aspects**

While young people find adults too strict and almost stoical, adults think of youngsters' emotional expressions as signs of weakness and lack of control. Younger people are less compartmentalized. "Work and fun" and "colleague and friend" are not clearly demarcated. Thinking with their hearts and feeling with their heads, they experience everything in a more holistic way.

We constantly work to enhance both expression and control of emotions. By providing avenues for expressing emotions, clearly marked for "feelings only," it is easier to look at things objectively later on. Students quickly learn to express their feelings and facts separately and lucidly. This gives them a clear signal

that feelings are not something undesirable. They are valuable and are respected, but they should not color the facts.

Often unrecognized or unexpressed feelings lead to unpredictable behaviors. By providing space to share feelings, we have developed a team of committed young people working together on a range of projects.

**Assumption No. 6**  
**Youth lack experience vs Adults not ready to give chances**

The unique privilege of being young belongs to the youth. We therefore see ourselves as an organization providing opportunities for young people to gain experience, learn, explore, and move on.

As a youth serving organization, we believe that "hands on" learning works best. Our theatre group consists of college students who undergo intensive training at the beginning of the year. The training takes place in the evenings, and during this period we create one or two plays that are then performed in a public space. Slowly, the group becomes consolidated and seeks assignments from other organizations on a voluntary basis.



After a year or so, some team members who participated in the program are able to take on paid assignments. Some are even professional theatre people now. One team is commissioned by the Government to perform plays on environmental issues.

**Assumption No. 7**  
**Young people only want to have fun vs Adults are straight-jacketed and boring**

Accepting youth's need for new experiences, especially in a world where entertainment is synonymous with fast-moving MTV visuals, we push ourselves to constantly innovate and think of new ways to be creative. In this process, we again involve young people.

We believe that whatever the task at hand, the methodology has to be enjoyable, fun, and exciting. In our campaigns for environmental issues, for example, we use films, music, and theatre very successfully.

For the last three years, our youth participants have led a series of campaigns. One was centered around discouraging the use of plastic bags in favor of paper ones through performing hundreds of street plays. Last year, our students made a film on the issue of water scarcity, highlighting how wasteful behaviors can lead to large-scale scarcity.

In summary, our experience of working with young people has been a very enriching one. We have worked hard to make the relationship work, by giving space and opportunities to young people. Applying democratic and flexible formats and considering innovative methodology and constant follow up are critical for success. In return, we have developed a team of committed young people with boundless energy and a vision for a better tomorrow.

*Jaya Iyer is an accomplished theater director in Delhi, with many successful productions. She currently runs the theater group at Pravah, blending innovative teaching methods that combine debates, theater, music, creative writing, and other project-based work.*

# Giving Meaning to School: Youth and Community Participation

by Sergio Sánchez, Rosa Alba Schroeder, and Susana Lamela

Middle School No. 2 is a public school in Moreno, in the province of Buenos Aires, Argentina. There are currently 800 students between 15 and 20 years old who come from the school's surrounding areas and from other low-income neighborhoods. Many of the students live in households adversely affected by unemployment, violence, and family disintegration.

In 1993, a group of teachers, assistants, counselors, and administrators identified several indicators of school failure: inadequate level of learning, boredom, high drop out rates, upper grade students' lack of interest and commitment to continuing their education, irrelevant curriculum content, and a devalued role for teachers. We found this situation was causing frustration and a sense of powerlessness in both faculty and students. External conditions imposed on the educational system and the system itself made it impossible for us to produce significant changes, and we also knew that small changes were worthless.

The group attempted a number of projects, including a school radio station, sex education workshops, support groups to overcome learning difficulties in the first year, camping trips, and tolerance and diversity workshops to reinvigorate the curriculum and engage students' interest. We found that these experiences offered both students and teachers very valuable lessons. However, the inflexible structure of the middle school often overpowered us, and we found it difficult to sustain these initiatives.

We soon realized that we had to take advantage of the system's own weaknesses and loopholes to change the situation and incorporate experiential learning into the curriculum. We based this decision on the belief that as teachers, we know students can fail, but we are also aware that the school itself can contribute to that failure. That is why we aimed at changing some of those unsuccessful institutional practices to include service-learning projects into the regular curriculum.

What did we try to do? Our goals were to:

- promote students' active role in the school and community through participation
- develop experiences that have a significant impact in the participants' personal growth and self-esteem
- encourage caring attitudes among students

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**In 1993, a group of teachers, assistants, counselors, and administrators identified several indicators of school failure: inadequate level of learning, boredom, high drop out rates, upper grade students' lack of interest and commitment to continuing their education, irrelevant curriculum content, and a devalued role for teachers.**

- develop service experiences within or outside the institution, as part of the learning process
- link school lessons to real life experiences
- teach students to plan and implement a project

### **Scope of work**

To meet these objectives, we set up a Solidarity Internships System. Solidarity Internships are actions, activities, and learning experiences that older students carry out with younger students in the school or with groups from other institutions, coordinated by teachers.

#### **Every Solidarity Internship must:**

- Complete three stages: a) study and research; b) the project itself, which serves a particular community group; c) documentation, analysis, and systematization of lessons learned to be presented in a final report
- Be compulsory for third year students
- Be graded by the teacher

We realized students can learn as much outside the school as inside it. Therefore, the internships were implemented to utilize the potential of the community as a larger classroom. Why should the community only be perceived as a place for residence or for business? Why not think about the community in broader terms and discover that education that can take place in other parts of the community, including learning employment-related skills?

We do not mean for our students' service activities to replace State responsibilities or those of adults. The goal is for students to gain certain competencies through civic engagement that will enhance their skills to contribute to the community's improvement and to facilitate their own involvement in it.

Teaching values such as caring, mutual respect, tolerance and acceptance of differences, and the commitment to action on behalf of others, are the key elements of our Solidarity Internships within the service-learning framework (that is, an educational model that incorporates community service into the school curriculum).

In the educational process, our students have opportunities to grow and play an active role in society. Some of the internship activities, which are planned for after school or on Saturdays, have taken place in the school itself, in areas like the library and the health office. Others have taken place in social service organizations, a special education school, an adult education center, a kindergarten, and a

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school for the deaf. One project included planning and conducting recreation activities for young children in a community center while their mothers work in micro-enterprise projects. Another involved working with mentally handicapped adult students.

Teachers choose the community organizations in which the students will serve. The students then choose the project they want to work on. The selected organizations are community groups in disadvantaged areas. In general, we seek a diversity of organizations to offer our students a better understanding of different community issues and needs. Most of the community organizations selected serve children, although we also develop activities with adults. An example would be providing academic support for adult students, and computer classes for unemployed parents in the school.

All projects follow the same approach. First, each group meets with the Internship teacher coordinator to research the needs of the group or agency with which they will work. This is the basis for a work plan with specific objectives and tasks. In the workshops, students are either participant observers or co-coordinators of activities. Once the group has identified the needs, students develop and implement direct service projects in the school or in community organizations.

Experiences are documented throughout the process in all internships. The project experiences and their specific problems are analyzed in relation to different subjects, such as culture and beliefs, gender differences, globalization, disease prevention/health promotion, unemployment, exclusion and poverty, strategic planning, or education. The projects are evaluated periodically, with two in-depth evaluations in the middle of the year and at the end. Such evaluations often lead to permanent readjustments. An Internships Committee of student, teacher, and administration representatives leads the evaluation projects.

## **Challenges**

The number of tasks involved in carrying out the internship program generates a large amount of work for the teacher in charge. At the beginning of the project, tasks always took place after school hours for which teachers received no pay. Today, we incorporated these lessons into the curriculum.

In addition, there are multiple roles that teachers involved in the project must play. The greatest reward is found in the job itself, in the time shared with colleagues and students and in the process of growing together. It is also important to point out a struggle that was created in the organization between the new program—which brings fear of the unknown—and traditional teaching practices, which while not satisfactory, offered the security of a familiar routine.

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**All projects follow the same approach. First, each group meets with the Internship teacher coordinator to research the needs of the group or agency with which they will work.**

Today, with a certain distance, we recognize that the project arose from a subgroup and not from everyone, even though those of us who developed the initiative tried very hard to reach a consensus.

## **Achievements**

During the preparation of the project, the faculty team was strengthened as a result of the common goal, the shared task, the study, and the reflection and deepening of the personal ties facilitated by time spent together.

When the internships began, ties were strengthened between teachers and students and among students. With a common goal (the proper performance of a job), the hierarchy present in a traditional classroom is broken and the effort is shared with joy. Also, this new relationship tends to move into the classroom, which in the case of students whose teacher is in charge of their internship, is translated into higher academic achievement in that subject.

Students increase their participation and engagement in the life of the school. They often offer to help teachers with jobs, cooperate in chaperoning groups, or take on administrative tasks or work in the library. In this way they gain confidence in their abilities, and very often they surprise us and make us proud of their accomplishments.

Because the Solidarity Internships affect all school activities, they have had multiplier effects on the faculty, who have found it rewarding to develop extracurricular activities with the students while recognizing the extra effort and commitment needed.

The goals set for students are achieved in terms of new learnings which students find meaningful because they can be easily applied. Students show increased self esteem, and appreciate their achievements. They also affirm their personality and improve their personal development. Also, in informal talks with teachers, the students discover the appreciation the teachers have for culture as something that is alive, and see that these values will have meaning in their lives.

Of course, not all youth achieve these objectives. In fact, there are those who are only concerned with fulfilling their internship as another obligation. However, most students show growth in at least one of the areas mentioned.

As teachers, we have had to study together to respond to new demands, getting used to working in groups and asking for help to solve problems, valuing colleagues, and working together. We have also gotten to know the youth better, their social structure, their aspirations, their fears, and their huge capacity to love and share happiness. We will never view the students with whom we developed an internship in the same way: we know them too well.

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## Conclusion

We mobilized to change the system. We are not bored anymore, and the students' and teachers' interest and commitment is greater. The contents and the school itself have a new meaning. These new meanings constantly appear in relationships and projects and these do not scare us anymore, but instead stimulate our own creativity.

We have now found strengths and reasons to face the task with optimism and have discovered that there are more things we want to learn together, for the youth and for ourselves.

In practice, we took on new challenges. The Solidarity Internships implied new responsibilities and new risks, which we assumed consciously, convinced that only by breaking down outdated structures will we improve education. Fortunately, we had new partners who contributed their enthusiasm to the project.

We started out with trust in youth, in their skills and potential, and also with trust in ourselves. We became our own support group, and relying on each other was essential to our work.

We keep growing as we weave cooperation and solidarity networks. We don't think this work is finished, but instead is something to which others can add, and that will lead to other forms of learning. But it is the one effort that today allows us to move away from the generalized frustration in our society, and to make real progress.

*There is no sharing*

*That does not lead to a project.*

*There is no project*

*That is not connected to a dream.*

*There is no dream*

*That can be accomplished without hope.*

*With a background in agricultural studies, Sergio Sanchez is the Principal at Middle School No. 2 in Moreno, Buenos Aires. He also teaches physics and mathematical analysis for teachers.*

*Rosa Alba Schroeder's degree is in education and social psychology. She is currently Vice-Principal at Middle School No.2 in Moreno, where she teaches Psychology. Rosa also coordinates early childhood education programs and study groups at the School of Social Psychology.*

*Susana Lamela Somoza, who has a degree in Education, coordinates the Solidarity Internships project at the Middle School No.2, teaches psychology, and chairs the Humanities Department.*

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**The Solidarity Internships implied new responsibilities and new risks, which we assumed consciously, convinced that only by breaking down outdated structures will we improve education.**



## Introduction

There is evidence that today's youth are less politically engaged than past generations. This was the common thread in discussions by policy-makers and researchers attending the Youth Policy and Research Conference of the European Commission held in Lisbon, Portugal in May 2001. In Latin America, political parties are having difficulty attracting young members who feel changes in the global economy and their own countries' role in it leave little hope for social change through politics. Similar findings are true for the United States and other regions where youth vote campaigns seek to reverse this trend. Apathy towards politics and politicians and a lack of motivation to participate through traditional channels (political parties, electoral campaigns, voting) seem to characterize youth in many countries. Competing interests and economic need also tend to lead young people to engage in activities other than public service, which makes it difficult to recruit the next generation of policy-makers and political leaders. Youth participation today tends to be issue-specific and service-oriented, rather than political.

Gaining influence on the political level, however, is a powerful tool for change. For example, Campus Compact (an organization that promotes community service on college campuses in the United States) and Youth Service America (profiled on pages 60-67 of this publication) have initiatives to encourage young volunteers to go beyond service and engage in voting and other forms of political advocacy. The articles that follow present the cases of two youth organizations which have moved in this direction and are working to exert influence at the political level in their countries, but from very different perspectives.

Thomas Busch offers an account of the development of a local youth council in Berlin, Germany. In proposing new political structures and training so that young people will become role models for others, Thomas sets the stage for a new generation of political figures in his country.

The second case study, by Adriana Benjumea, presents a very different scenario. In Colombia, a country that has suffered violent internal conflict for many years, youth are generally perceived and portrayed as either criminals or victims, but rarely as a strong, constructive force. Adriana describes the goals and challenges of Red Juvenil de Medellín (Youth Network of Medellín), a youth organization that challenges the government's policies through conscientious objection and opposition to all types of violence.

## Creating a Local Youth Council

by Thomas Busch

The 90s have seen Germany's youth in a state of political apathy and indifference to civil participation. All political parties, the moderate as well as those to the extreme left and right, and their youth divisions are suffering from a shrinking number of young applicants for membership. At the same time, some of the classical channels of civil political participation—such as demonstrations and participatory structures like school counselor jobs or labor union positions—are disappearing. Those becoming indifferent to democratic participation mostly confess to being overcome by a dwindling trust in the efficiency of their participation and in the opportunity to be able to influence political decision making at all. Often, this is accompanied by a loss of confidence in the ability of policymakers to influence important global developments.

Young people are likely to disapprove of the structures of adult political discourse, especially the debate tactics of full-time politicians, while at the same time they stress that there still is a strong interest in political and social topics. They seem to be tired of politicians, but not of political issues. Nevertheless, Germany has to struggle against a growing number of young people who, disillusioned by democracy, try to find a way of expressing their ideals in anti-democratically organized cells and structures.

As a result, there is a great demand for structures that are able to support youth's involvement in democracy and to train young people to become role models for those who are currently indifferent. There are many signs of hope and goodwill to improve this frightening situation. Many local, non-institutionally bound youth participation projects are being implemented by local governmental agencies or foundations, or are being developed and led by active and visionary young people who are driven by the strong desire to make a change.

But even if there is a highly supported governmental initiative and German law binds communities to support and stimulate child and youth participation at the local level, there is a huge gap between norms and reality. Most projects suffer from lack of funds because inventing a consistent and effective youth participation model takes a long time to show outcomes, and is not covered by any of the modern short-term action programs. Sometimes projects fail due to their inherent structural weakness and basic mistakes in the implementation process.

Clearly there is no magic formula for an effective youth participation project and no guarantee for its success, but youth participation models invented,



developed, and co-steered by young people themselves may have the best chance of survival.

I had the opportunity to be part of such a movement—the establishment in 1997 of a consistent, effective, and legitimate local youth council. I created it along with five friends, ranging in age from 17 to 21. We were not affiliated with any political party. It took us a long time, however, to reach our goal of implementing the first session of 21 young representatives, elected by more than 15,000 young people in our community, and running the first community-based initiatives.

When we started the project, there were no sustainable, effective and action-oriented youth participation projects in our surrounding area. Every former model in our community had been very specific, unsatisfying, and ineffective because there had been no obligations for adult decision makers afterwards. My friends and I were introduced to better programs when attending a 1997 conference run by the German Children and Youth Foundation (GCYF) on youth participation.

We developed our own youth participation model to better meet our needs, through the creation of a stable local youth council. The council consists of 21 young people between 14 and 20 years of age who were elected for one year by the youth of our community. In addition to the council, we wanted to create a more action-based, spontaneous kind of work. We did so by creating issue-oriented working groups or events like participation fairs or workshops.

To bridge the gap between adults and youth, we set aside funds to create a peer-led service agency that youth could use when they needed help for a project. But an important gap still remained. There is no legal basis to enforce the implementation of decisions by a legitimate youth group. We tried to overcome this missing link by establishing a contact group of adults and young project members aimed at lobbying local decisionmakers.

Another challenge was to have our representatives endorsed by as many young people as possible through public ballots. This was aimed not only at strengthening our position in relation to local government, but enhancing our public relations efforts for the project.

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**My friends and I were introduced to better programs when attending a 1997 conference run by the German Children and Youth Foundation (GCYF) on youth participation. We developed our own youth participation model to better meet our needs, through the creation of a stable local youth council.**



We reached out to the 70 secondary schools in our community and managed to visit every institution two weeks before the election to advertise the campaign and recruit candidates. During the election, we went out to all the schools again with a special election truck and presented the candidates to the young voters by video. The whole election process turned into an important event and was very participatory because all students had the right to vote. We reached a voter turnout of more than 85 percent.

Every model of youth participation has to be adjusted to the local social, geographical, cultural, and political circumstances, and there is no standard model that can be replicated everywhere. But even if there are dozens of possibilities to implement a youth participation model, there are some conditions that are relevant to creating a win-win situation for all participants, young as well as adult, which I will describe here in brief:

**A conscientious youth participation model must rely on an "in-my-backyard" policy**

According to the age of the target group, decision making should be limited to issues and themes which are common in young representatives' daily lives, tangible issues that affect them directly and to which they have easy access. We sent our project members as local experts to playground commissions and to other places where decisions affecting youths' lives were made. Such a policy also reflects the need to create geographically small decision-making units in limited areas.

**An open participation model needs to offer a flexible, wide range of issues and structures**

Young people find themselves in different stages of development. To create a democratically open project, youth have to find support for their present needs. So a project with a chance to survive needs different structures which may range from spontaneous short-term action groups to stable working councils with a hierarchy of leaders and regular members. This allows for openness and flexibility in decision-making processes and creates a structure that motivates everybody to participate, regardless of their social class or education level. This was our idea when creating two levels of participation: A loose network of young activists in spontaneous action groups and a core group of deeply involved members, elected for a full year to the youth council.

**A modern participation model needs flexible, action-oriented methods of action and real teamwork**

A successful participation model needs unique actions "with character." For example, we protested publicly at schools against the financial constraints in the education system by donating personal books and paper to these local institutions. Modern forms to shape public opinion like e-democracy or Internet lobbying are also important channels to involve youth. None of these projects will work without an enthusiastic teamwork atmosphere in the group promoted by every facilitator available.

**A success-oriented participation model needs youth-oriented methods of work and communication**

Those engaged in youth participation models must develop their own language and avoid copying adult discussion formats to offer a reliable alternative for youth critical of the communication style of adult political work. We tried to achieve this objective by not simply sitting around a table carrying on endless discussions, but by visiting current projects and formulating concrete action plans whenever possible.

**Young people need immediate feedback about project results**

Political decision-making processes tend to extend over long periods of time. Young people live in shorter time spans than those of adults, and therefore need immediate positive response to their efforts. We had difficulty maintaining our enthusiasm during the long four-year implementation process, frequently interrupted by seemingly irrelevant bureaucratic barriers. Youth-relevant communication strategies are necessary to keep young people motivated in these situations.

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**According to the age of the target group, decision making should be limited to issues and themes which are common in young representatives' daily lives, tangible issues that affect them directly and to which they have easy access.**



**A youth participation project needs to be non-hierarchical and have steady one-on-one communication with decision makers**

Youth councils' plans should be shared openly with adult decision makers in an inter-generational discussion—something that we did after each session. In that dialogue, young people must be allowed to take the lead in the discussion process, its format and development. When intergenerational conflicts arise, older youth can serve as mediators between their younger peers and adults. The flow of communication should always be focused on building consensus, not on simmering conflicts.

**For youth participation to be continuous and steady, it needs a stable environment**

Effective youth participation needs a comfortable and protected environment in which it can continuously develop. Funders and project managers must give young people the chance to adapt and make use of this space. Whether there is a young or adult project manager, the relationship between the participants and this individual needs enough time to grow in a trustful and personally satisfying way. A secure, stable, and enriching environment needs regular and stable jobs for those who work with young people. Short term employment for youth workers, or even job-creation measures that bring in workers without the proper skills to work with youth, can be counter-productive in terms of creating a successful environment for youth participation. Our own youth council was successful due to the steady voluntary involvement of those peers who helped to create the project in the first place.

**Adults may serve the project as assistants and mediators**

Older peers or adults working as project assistants in a paid position can relieve young participants of some communication and coordination responsibilities with adults. All tasks to be delegated to older assistants should be solely determined by the young people. In our participation model, the young people used their project assistants as interpreters to translate adult language into youth language (e.g, while dealing with laws or political documents), schedule appointments for the youth while they were in school, or to assist with administrative jobs like mailing



letters. Assistants should never take over the lead of an initiative and always stay in the background as "big friends" to assist when problems arise, or as mediators in the case of conflicts.

### **Project assistants must create a participatory environment free of ideologies**

The only special task for project assistants to act by themselves is when it is necessary to restore or create an atmosphere free of any political, cultural, or religious ideology. Project assistants in youth participation projects should have the right to call attention to stereotypes and prejudice when they emerge in discussions or when party politics affect the free-flow of democratic debate. In the case of the youth council, we had to defend the young independent participants from the influence of young party members, and the young politicians from the independents' stereotypes about them. Project assistants have the responsibility of creating the project within a just, open, and democratic environment where nobody fears speaking their mind.

### **Youth participation must be sufficiently and sustainably funded**

Every youth participation model needs to be free from worries about its financial situation. Permanent lack of finances demoralizes young people and dampens their energy due to constant struggles for money. In our case, the local government denied us financing because of internal struggles about the need for youth participation in the coalition of the local parties, and we could only get funds by applying for several action programs and by winning awards and prizes. Young people need to feel respected for their tremendous amount of voluntary work. A project modeled around such principles can contribute to building and strengthening democracy and participation in a continuous, effective, and fun way.

Our experience shows that a youth project created with these principles can be independent, and serve those of different educational, economic, and ethnic backgrounds. It is a horizontal approach to developing young leaders at the local level. It is not an elitist leadership building program, but one that is open and democratic. Participation means sharing in the decision-making process, and must not be misused as a vehicle for fighting in the trenches of adult party politics.

This is one of the main problems of current political participation projects in Germany: Many newly youth-created local youth councils or parliaments get infiltrated by young party members who manipulate young people not yet involved in the political process who seek ways to find their own identity and play adult roles as early as possible. The youth sections of the political parties, suffering

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**Our project is a horizontal approach to developing young leaders at the local level. It is not an elitist leadership building program, but one that is open and democratic. Participation means sharing in the decision-making process, and must not be misused as a vehicle for fighting in the trenches of adult party politics.**

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**Adults and young people in Germany need a renewed culture of cooperation, communication, and interaction.**

from shrinking applications themselves, erroneously see youth participation projects as parallel to their own work, not realizing the differing target groups and the chances for further co-operation in civil society.

Adults and young people in Germany need a renewed culture of cooperation, communication, and interaction. Adults have to accept the autonomous ways and language of young people to express their opinion and have to adapt to their forms of interaction to build up trust and intergenerational understanding. Young people have to differentiate their often negative view of adults, from the concrete situation, to learn to talk confidently and openly with adults and defend their own opinions as legitimate.

An important task remains: to raise awareness among political decision makers of the urgent need for greater civil participation across party membership, and for improved communication and interaction between generations. International foundations and their global networks have the strength and structure to serve as multipliers for this culture of understanding, enabling the scaling up of effective youth participation models. The exchange of best practices within these networks can also increase the number of youth involved. And finally, the implementation of new programs, ranging from workshops to service learning projects, may help us move towards a global civil society.

*Thomas Busch is a founding member of the Youth Parliament Berlin-Reinickendorf, an institution created and led by young people to promote political youth participation in local communities. He has also worked as a coordinator for convening young people in European Students' and Youth Conferences in 1998 and 1999. Thomas works in close collaboration with the German Children and Youth Foundation, where he provides guidance as a youth advisor on program development issues and on national competitions on democracy building and technology. A student at the Berlin University of Arts and the Technical University of Berlin, studying music and history, Thomas is a member of the IYF YouthActionNet Task Force.*

## Youth Network of Medellín

by Adriana Benjumea

The Youth Network of Medellín is a grassroots organization created with and for young people in 1990. It was founded in response to the stigmatization of youth in Colombia as either victims or criminals, but rarely as community builders. The young people of Colombia—a country torn for years by social and armed conflict—were portrayed as belonging to a negative underground culture, as vulnerable and dangerous. Yet others, who also live in the city and spend time helping children, mentoring their peers, and serving their community, remained invisible. To reverse this situation and show a different face of youth, young leaders from different organizations came together to run an image-building campaign: "Juventud Pisando Fuerte" (Youth Stepping Firmly). Numerous campaigns followed, all with the same goal: to go beyond the role of youth as beneficiaries and to seek respect and recognition as protagonists.

But what type of protagonist or central role are we seeking? It can be argued that if this concept is understood as being visible in the media—such as carrying a gun, or being shot—then youth engagement in Colombia is widespread. In this sense, many Colombian youth see their participation in the armed conflict as an option to be recognized. At the same time, another type of participation of young people as conveyed by the media is not real. It is artificially created and promoted, but not necessarily chosen by youth. Even the image of young people as consumers, following what fashion and publicity dictate, is, in fact, everyone's responsibility: that of adults for creating it, and of youth for allowing it.

The Youth Network considers this a very narrow interpretation of protagonism, and seeks ways to channel young people's energy through social, political, cultural, creative, and non-violent participation. To be protagonists is not to act individually, but as part of a larger initiative which is not only legal, but legitimate in the public's eye. Therefore, the Youth Network of Medellín operates under one banner: we oppose war—we refuse to bear arms, to kill, or to be killed. This principle highlights the fact that there are active youth in Medellín who object to violence and who, from a position of civil disobedience, find other ways to contribute to the development of their country. In other words, our hope is to create a more humane and just world, without patriarchy, where access to education, health, and nutrition is everyone's right.

We are concerned about the apathy that characterizes many youth in Colombia and even the world. It is too comfortable and conformist to accept and

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**We refuse to be treated as a vulnerable sector, as such a perception negates our strength and creativity and promotes irrelevant policies.**

allow the growing social problems in our country while youth devote themselves to having fun. Fun and apathy cannot be confused. It is possible for young people to be creative, happy, and full of energy, while also being sensitive and committed to changing the harsh realities of Latin America. To have the ability and desire to be valid partners with adults in creating social change does not make us less young.

The Network operates on the following principles:

- We seek youth empowerment to achieve meaningful participation.
- If armed groups in our country have spent the last 40 years at war and have not changed anything, we claim the right to spend the next 40 years seeking change through non-violent means. If we do not achieve anything, nothing will be lost. If we succeed, it will be our reward for taking the risk.
- We refuse to be treated as a vulnerable sector, as such a perception negates our strength and creativity and promotes irrelevant policies.
- We refuse to participate in resolving conflicts through violence.
- Being young does not eliminate the state's responsibility towards us. On the contrary, it leads us to feel empowered to affirm our human rights.
- Protagonism is not an end in itself, but a tool to achieve other rights.

### **The Youth Network**

We work in three areas of the city, with one coordinator responsible for each area and for direct contact with the youth: the Northeast, the Northwest, and the central area—mostly low-income neighborhoods in Medellín. There is an average of ten groups in each area, and each group has about 12 members.

The network meets at the Annual Assembly, where we plan future activities, assess the budget, evaluate the year's work, and name a committee to coordinate the activities for the following year. This committee, in turn, works with a task force whose members have experience in specific issues to plan annual projects.

We are organized around the following programs or activities:

- Administration: Fundraising, international contacts, and administration
- Youth Protagonism: Youth leadership training and participation
- Social and Political Participation: Training in social and political activism is targeted to ensuring that when members leave the network, younger participants will take their place and the work can continue.
- Human Rights, Conscientious Objection and Non-Violence: This is currently the most dynamic program within the network. Activities include a study group on non-violence which offers workshops on cooperative games and teamwork in

Medellín schools, and a music group that condemns war and violence. The program offers legal advice from attorneys for youth who have been victims of police abuse.

- Communications: Newsletters, videos and other media
- Culture: Cultural programs and music performances
- Other projects: Outreach and coordination of activities of unaffiliated youth who wish to contribute to the network's activities.

It should be noted that the oldest member in the network is the general coordinator, who is 28 years old.

### **The Network's Activities**

Among the activities carried out by the Network was the 1999 Facing the Millennium Youth Campaign, a proclamation presented to the city against war, consumerism, and negative images of youth as well as a campaign for youth rights. Next year, we will present the city of Medellín with documentation on the violation of its young people's economic, social, and cultural rights. Another activity involved conscientious objectors. Social and legal supports were provided for youth who refuse to comply with mandatory military service.

### **Achievements**

We have been recognized in the city as a different kind of youth group for all we have accomplished and for our potential. The Network has established its own relationships with foreign organizations, and received support from German agencies. We are considered partners in decision-making rather than just grantees. We also consider it an accomplishment that we have put forth non-violence as an option in a country so submerged in conflict and known worldwide for its civil war. The fact that we have succeeded in organizing a number of successful youth-led projects is in itself an accomplishment. These activities attracted large numbers of youth and achieved excellent results for the participants—both individuals and their organizations.

### **Challenges**

We continue to face numerous challenges. Among them, we seek to:

- Keep working through non-violent means for the recognition of young people's rights, not as a way to gain access to services for those who can pay for them, but as true rights guaranteed by the State
- Reach a point when youth participation in Medellín transcends an advisory role to become a decision-making role

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**We have been recognized in the city as a different kind of youth group for all we have accomplished and for our potential.**

- Recover public space for youth to use freely
- Ensure the national and local governments understand that current security and juvenile justice policies make no sense, and that we are more than vulnerable or at-risk youth, and therefore need more than safety and rehabilitation strategies.

### Lessons

Among the lessons we have learned are the following:

- We are not the majority of youth, but just a small segment of the youth population, and we need to respect other young people's options.
- As young people, we come from different experiences and backgrounds. Each one of us can contribute to building society.
- We need to establish friendships beyond our work because only values stemming from love and friendship can save us in the midst of so much social and political conflict.
- The diversity among youth adds richness to all processes, even if it makes it harder to achieve consensus.

As a writer friend has said, we know we will not change the world completely. But we also know that we are not here to leave the world as it is, but to shape it in the image of our dreams and hopes for the future.

*A recent graduate from Universidad de Antioquia's law school, Adriana Benjumea is a member of the Youth Network's advisory group. She's a former program coordinator of the network's Programs on Social and Political Participation and Youth Protagonism, and also coordinates youth exchanges with German organizations as part of Grupo por un Mundo (Group for One World).*

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**We seek to ensure the national and local governments understand that current security and juvenile justice policies make no sense, and that we are more than vulnerable or at-risk youth, and therefore need more than safety and rehabilitation strategies.**







## **Introduction**

Mainstreaming youth participation means incorporating their voices into all decisions as a matter of course. This implies major changes in attitudes, policies, and social structures similar to the way we are now working to incorporate women's issues and perspectives.

There are any number of indicators that a society's perception of youth is shifting from viewing them in their traditional roles as sons, daughters, and students to those of workers, parents, and citizens. One example would be to find youth issues discussed as matters of national importance in the front pages of newspapers rather than relegated to the family section. Here is another example: all policy-making agencies in the country would have an active youth committee in place. In other words, mainstreaming youth participation means changing our thinking about the young and to recognize they have a right to participate in the public realm. Youth advocate Rakesh Rajani states that: "In order to have wider and more sustainable impact, the promotion of young people's participation needs to move away from ad hoc, activity-based approaches and become mainstreamed in the central aspects of social structures, institutions, and processes."<sup>14</sup>

Some of the key strategies according to Rajani, to mainstream youth participation include:

- Prioritizing institutionalized youth participation in settings and practices that young people experience on a regular basis, such as the household, schools, and local government
- Supporting youth organizations that maximize the space for democratic participation, such as issue clubs, sports teams, or student government
- Fostering youth involvement in governance structures and processes, including local government, chambers of commerce, NGO boards, and associations
- Stimulating a real public dialogue about children and young people's participation at the community, national, and global levels

These are some of the issues addressed in this final section. Agon Demjaha of the Balkan Children and Youth Foundation (an IYF partner) discusses the very real challenges of promoting youth engagement in a region where economic problems and violent conflict can often override their motivation to participate. Michael McCabe of Youth Service America shares lessons from Youth Service America's work as an intermediary organization seeking to "make meaningful youth service the common experience and expectation of all youth."

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<sup>14</sup> Rajani, Rakesh (2000) The Case for Youth Participation, presented at IYF's 10th Annual Partners Meeting (Oaxaca, Mexico, October 2000).

## Youth Participation in the Balkans: Wishful Thinking or Long-term Reality?

by Agon Demjaha

Since the collapse of communism in the early 1990s, the countries of the Balkan region have undergone a transition towards a market economy and a pluralistic democracy. During this period, the youth in these countries have had a special opportunity to participate in consolidating democracy, developing civil society, and in countries of the former Yugoslavia, even building newly independent nations. The hope was that the identification of youth with these historical changes, as well as their active participation throughout the entire process, would help ensure the sustainability of the reform process. In addition, it was hoped that through their active political and social participation, youth in the Balkans would be able to shape their societies into ones with which they could more closely identify.

Unfortunately, in addition to the dissolution of the former Yugoslavia and the creation of new nation states, the already complicated transitional process has been further marred by the conflicts in Croatia, Bosnia, Kosovo, and recently Macedonia, and by the subsequent social and economic instability. In those countries directly involved in the conflicts, the development of civil society in general and of youth participation in particular have been greatly delayed. In other countries of the Balkans that were not directly affected by the conflicts, some progress has been made in civil society development, but the level of youth participation is still low.





It should be made clear that youth participation here means the active participation of young people in program decisions, design, and implementation. In the case of active participation, young people should be given the tools and provided with the conditions to design their own

world and future, while adults should be there only to support and advise them. In this context, the youth-serving NGOs in the region could be divided into two groups: NGOs established and led by youth themselves, and those which work with youth and children, but also deal with issues such as the environment, women, culture, the arts, and health. Undoubtedly, when talking about active youth participation, we refer more to the former rather than to the latter type of NGOs.

When analyzing the problem of youth participation in the Balkans, one should be aware that contrary to the developed Western countries, we are talking about a substantial part of the overall population. According to recent data, youth ages 15 to 24 make up to 20 percent of the population in the Balkan countries. Unfortunately, the level of youth participation hardly matches this reality.

Voter turnout certainly represents one of the most straightforward indicators of political participation—although even in well-established democratic societies, young voters generally exhibit lower turnout rates than adults. In Balkan countries, however, this phenomenon is even more prevalent. Keeping in mind the currently increased sense of civic pride of young people in many of these new independent states, one may expect even lower turnout in the future. Moreover, in the Balkan countries generally, there is a considerable degree of mistrust among youth towards politics and formal governmental institutions in general. In Bosnia and Herzegovina, for instance, only seven percent of young people believe that they can influence political activities in their country, while as many as 55 percent are disinterested in politics.

In addition, although youth in the region often face problems and risks similar to their Western peers, the existing support networks are much weaker. Consequently, the position of the youth throughout the region has become very difficult, often leading to despair, hopelessness, and lack of perspective. Consequently, young people in the Balkan countries are very keen on leaving.

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**Voter turnout certainly represents one of the most straightforward indicators of political participation—although even in well-established democratic societies, young voters generally exhibit lower turnout rates than adults. In Balkan countries, however, this phenomenon is even more prevalent.**

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**Despite a wide variety of social organizations, sports and recreation clubs, and nongovernmental organizations, the share of youth formally joining them rarely exceeds 10 percent.**

A survey among secondary school students in Albania a few years ago found that the main goal for almost 90 percent of youth was to emigrate. Similarly, in Bosnia and Herzegovina, 62 percent of the young people would like to leave the country, while almost half of them hardly feel attached at all to their homeland. Among young people's most frequently mentioned reasons for wishing to leave the country are the low standard of living, high unemployment, and the feeling of having no prospects in their country. It is clear that in a situation like this, exploring ways to empower young people in the region to seize new opportunities and avoid greater hazards is of extreme importance. Restoring their confidence in society in general, and in adults in particular, certainly represents a good starting point.

On the other hand, youth participation in civil society in the Balkans should be viewed within the new emerging relationships between the state and civil society. Despite a wide variety of social organizations, sports and recreation clubs, and nongovernmental organizations, the share of youth formally joining them rarely exceeds 10 percent. Although NGOs contribute to the greatest number of youth organizations in the region, most of them are still young and suffer from the mistrust of governments and the public towards them. In addition, the hierarchical structures inherited from Communist times are often still present, even among youth-serving NGOs. In such cases, one can hardly talk about any real youth participation, since the entire decision-making process functions in a top-down manner.

Total reliance on foreign funding represents another major impediment in fostering youth participation among youth-serving NGOs in the Balkans. Due to weak economies, states in the region have hardly been able to support any youth initiatives. This has in turn resulted in permanent lack of financial support that has further demoralized young people and dampened their enthusiasm for active participation. Although the international funding has often served as a remedy for this problem, one can certainly say that youth initiatives in the Balkans are neither properly nor sustainably funded. The approach of international donors has often been one of a quick fix with no signs of willingness to make long-term commitments. It is precisely because of these problems that the readiness of the Balkan Children and Youth Foundation to provide long-term financial support to the youth-serving NGOs in the region is of such crucial importance—and undoubtedly represents an added value as compared with the previous donors' policies.

The complicated set of the above-mentioned problems of youth participation existing in all countries of the Balkans requires a cohesive regional approach in order to meet both immediate needs and to develop long-term models. Such a parallel intervention philosophy is necessary to maintain credibility under very strained human relations—witnessed in virtually every local community in the Balkans, but

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particularly in Albania, Macedonia, Bosnia and, of course, Kosovo and Serbia. Such an approach would entail different avenues of regional cooperation, including fulfilling immediate needs in terms of reconciliation initiatives, awareness building of the role of youth-serving NGOs, and nurturing existing national youth institutions and networks. In addition, this would foster continuous building of democracy and European identity from existing networks and initiatives supported in each locality. Finally, it is only through a regional approach that one could develop new models for lasting security and cooperation in the region while trying to unify these divided countries around youth as their most precious asset.



In conclusion, youth participation in the Balkans, in terms of young people's engagement in decision-making processes at all stages and in all areas of life, is not yet satisfactory. In some former Communist countries with already recovered economies and increased employment, young people are perhaps socially and politically more active than before—due in part to their mobility and increased language and computer skills. However, in the Balkan countries that are still trapped by economic problems and often by the many consequences of war, youth still need more schooling, jobs, and stability. In such a situation, it is only by raising awareness among political and other relevant decision makers about the need for greater youth involvement that youth participation in the Balkans can become a long-term reality.

*Agon Demjaha, who is from Kosovo, is the Executive Director of the Balkan Children and Youth Foundation. With a degree in Electrical Engineering and post-graduate studies in International Relations, he directed the Children's Theater Center in Skopje, and founded the Center for the Development of Civil Society (now called Kosovar Civil Society Foundation). He has also served as Program Coordinator at the Open Society Institute in Yugoslavia.*

## Making Youth Participation and Service the Common Experience and Expectation of all Youth: The Story of Youth Service America

by Michael McCabe

**D**r. Martin Luther King once wrote that "everybody can be great because everybody can serve." This sentiment pervades Youth Service America's efforts to make meaningful youth service the common experience and expectation of all youth—regardless of class, gender, race, religion, physical disability, or other factors.

Youth Service America (YSA) is a resource center and an alliance of more than 200 organizations working to increase the quantity and quality of opportunities for young Americans to volunteer locally, nationally, or even globally. Founded in 1986, YSA was created as an umbrella organization to help connect the efforts of hundreds of youth civic engagement programs around the United States and to help increase the scale, effectiveness, and sustainability of their programs. YSA has also been highly successful at promoting youth engagement and mainstreaming the issue through public awareness campaigns.

### Background

Civic participation has been a core tenant of American society since its inception. The American political framework has long emphasized small, decentralized government, often forcing the development of civic groups to meet the needs of those falling through the social safety net. As America moved from an industrial to an information-based society in the 1980s, there was a growth of civic groups working to meet new community needs through mobilizing youth and adults into volunteer service. Nowhere was this growth more evident than in the youth service field, where thousands of organizations emerged. Traditionally, youth in the United States are first introduced to service and civic engage-



ment through their schools, faith groups, or other civic groups such as Scouts, Campfire, YMCA, and 4-H to name a few. At the same time these groups became more active in promoting service, thousands of new service entry points became available.

The rapid growth of programs focused on engaging youth in civic action was accompanied by a severe lack of communication and coordination between efforts at the local and national levels. This led to duplication of efforts, an inability to compile lessons learned, and a diluted voice in the field in terms of leveraging public support and funding. Furthermore, youth demand for quality opportunities for civic engagement has now outstripped the supply.

## Goals

Youth Service America was created to fill the gap of unifying the field and raising public awareness about the importance of youth service. YSA also developed direct programs to convene the youth service field and provide tools to strengthen organizational capacity to carry out quality youth civic engagement activities.

Since its creation, YSA's vision has been to make youth service the common expectation and experience of all young people. YSA found that young people who are involved in service are 50 percent less likely to abuse drugs and alcohol, or be involved in teen delinquency, and are more likely to do better academically and to be active citizens when they become adults. Thus, YSA had powerful research to make a convincing case to its various target audiences about supporting youth service programs.

YSA works to meet its goals by creating useful knowledge tools for the field and by structuring its nine programs around three niche areas of action. The Youth Service Information Network encompasses YSA's work to gather information from across the field and repackage it into knowledge tools that all organizations can access. This is mainly done through YSA's National Service Member Network composed of more than 200 affiliates, a weekly National Service Briefing going out to 5,000 groups, a Working Group on National and Community Service that convenes leaders around issues of importance to the field such as pending legislation; and the co-sponsoring (with the National Youth Leadership Council) of the National Service Learning Conference that convenes 3,200 youth service and service-learning professionals and youth. At the conference, a special two day Youth As Decision-makers Forum gathers youth leaders from around the country to discuss strategies and exchange resources on how youth can strengthen their efforts. In addition, YSA created SERVE.net.org as a portal web site where groups can post and find information on volunteer and job opportunities in the service field, service

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**National/Global Youth Service Day is the largest service event in the world and mobilizes 3.3 million youth in 117 countries to highlight their year-round contributions to their communities through service and civic action.**

news, events, best practices, and other resources. The most utilized part of the site is the Get Involved box, a national database of local volunteer opportunities.

A second role for YSA is its Youth As Resources public awareness campaign that encompasses National and Global Youth Service Day, and a series of award recognition programs. National/Global Youth Service Day is the largest service event in the world and mobilizes 3.3 million youth in 117 countries to highlight their year-round contributions to their communities through service and civic action. The President's Student Service Award is an award program that YSA administers for the White House that recognizes all youth from ages 5 to 25 who carry out at least 100 hours of service during a 12-month period. In addition, YSA helps foundations and corporations such as Nike, MTV, and Hasbro create special award recognition programs to mobilize and recognize youth involved in various forms of service and civic action.

A third role for YSA has been to provide training and technical assistance to youth service-related organizations and to young leaders. Over the years, YSA has developed and administered leadership training programs such as the Prudential Youth Leadership Institute, the New Generation Training Program, and the Fund for Social Entrepreneurs. Its newest training program is the Youth Civic Action Network (Youth CAN) that focuses on training youth and youth professionals on how to help young volunteers understand and act on the underlying causes of the issues they care about through advocacy.

### **Target Population**

As an intermediary national organization, YSA's target audiences are broader than most direct service partners. On the one hand, YSA targets thousands of professionals working at youth service related organizations, helping them to strengthen their capacity to engage youth in quality civic action. YSA also targets the general public through its awareness building campaigns as a way of generating increased resources for youth service groups nationwide. Lastly, YSA does direct work with youth, ages 5 to 25, by providing them with information, tools, and opportunities to create their own service and civic action projects.







## Achievements

YSA's efforts to build the youth service field and the capacity of organizations in the field has had tremendous direct and indirect impacts on scaling up youth service and civic action.

### ■ *Developing Public Awareness of the Power of Youth Service*

Through National and Global Youth Service Day, YSA has managed a highly successful media campaign that has generated over 310 million media impressions each year about how youth are making positive impacts in their communities. YSA also believes that through increasing the visibility of youth civic action that they can also create a new social norm. The norm

would convince other youth to get more involved in civic action because they constantly see messages about how millions of youth are volunteering. One key partnership in this effort has been YSA's relationship with *Parade* Magazine (the largest circulation magazine in the United States with 75 million weekly readers). *Parade* dedicates two cover issues a year to YSA and promoting youth service. In addition, YSA leverages its corporate partnerships with groups such as AOL, Channel One, and MTV to increase the visibility of youth involved in civic action. YSA also uses major columnists such as Ann Landers (92 million daily readers) to submit an annual appeal for connecting youth to youth service opportunities.

### ■ *Mobilizing America's Youth into Civic Action*

Through National Youth Service Day, SERVENet's Get Involved Database, and the President's Student Service Awards, YSA has created incentives and opportunities for over 3.3 million youth each year to get involved in ongoing concrete civic action projects. In 2001, YSA launched a new online tool called Project Plan-It! that allows youth to plan their own civic action projects through a series of fun interactive templates on the YSA website.

### ■ *Incubating Innovation and Preparing Leadership*

YSA plays an important role in helping incubate young leaders in the service field and their organizations, by serving as their fiscal agent or providing them needed training. Through its Fund for Social Entrepreneurs, YSA helped cultivate 24 innovative leaders and their programs from the start-up phase through to the organizational growth phase. Many of the YSA-supported groups have gone on to become nationally recognized model programs.

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**As an intermediary national organization, YSA's target audiences are broader than most direct service partners.**



- *Connecting Youth with Quality Opportunities and Resources*

Through SERVENet.org, YSA has mobilized more than 30,000 volunteer opportunities and helped 45,000 youth and adults connect to these opportunities via the Internet.

- *Building Sustainability and Innovation*

Last year, YSA made over \$400,000 in grants to 200 youth-led projects and organizations as a means of seeding innovation and eventually sustainability in the field.

- *Providing Public Sector Support*

YSA's work in the late 1980s on generating government support for national service and service-learning programs helped bring about the passage of the National and Community Service Trust Act in 1990. This legislation helped create the Corporation for National and Community Service, a government agency that coordinates government funding for thousands of youth service-learning programs nationwide. YSA continues to help coordinate advocacy efforts to increase federal support for the Corporation's programs such as AmeriCorps and Learn and Serve America. In 2000, Congress appropriated US\$435 million for these programs nationwide.

## **Challenges**

YSA has had to overcome a series of challenges in carrying out its work. First, intermediary organizations such as YSA sometimes find it more difficult to raise funds, since many funders are interested in funding direct service organizations. YSA has carefully cultivated its long term corporate and foundation donors and educated them on the value and importance of umbrella organizations such as YSA. Second, it is more difficult for umbrella organizations such as YSA to measure the actual outcomes and impact of their programs on youth behavior and community development. YSA has developed a series of strategic partnerships with key affiliates to facilitate evaluation of impact.

The youth civic engagement field and youth in the United States face additional challenges, including:

- Lack of quality service/civic action opportunities to which to connect interested youth
- Lack of consistent financial support to carry out their activities
- Lack of connection by most youth between their record high levels of volunteering and their record low levels of other civic engagement such as voting or advocating for policy changes.

## **Lessons learned**

YSA has learned many lessons about how intermediary level umbrella organizations can best stimulate greater youth civic participation. A few of the lessons learned include:

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■ *Clearly define and communicate with your various audiences*

YSA has worked hard to develop the right tools for specific audiences (youth, non-profits, corporate sponsors, general public, etc). By customizing messages and materials to specific audiences, it increases their interest in supporting the overall effort. For example, YSA pays a great deal of attention to ensuring that its materials and projects are age appropriate. YSA does three versions of its National Youth Service Day Curriculum Guide, one for kindergarten through 6th grade teachers, one for 7th through 12th grade teachers, and one for community-based leaders who do service learning. In addition, through its Get Involved! database, youth can search by one of 180 variables for service opportunities that match their skills, interests, and age.

■ *Reach youth where they are*

YSA disseminates its information, tools, and resources to youth by targeting the organizations where youth typically are found. For example, YSA brought on all the major education organizations, teacher unions, and Channel One as partners for National Youth Service Day and the President's Student Service Awards to reach youth in school. It also has partnered with key Internet companies such as AOL, Yahoo, and others to reach young people on the Internet and to challenge them to click and get involved. In 2000, YSA partnered with the pop music sensation Backstreet Boys to do a national contest to highlight youth who were doing service in each city of their nationwide concert tour.

■ *Cultivate your media partner network*

YSA has a strong database of media covering youth or service-related stories. This growing database is used for press releases and press events throughout the year, generating 310 million media impressions last year alone. YSA cultivates key media partners such as *Parade* and *Seventeen* magazines, Channel One, AOL, and MTV. YSA always works to find out what the particular media group's needs are so that both organizations can benefit from the partnership. In particular, media organizations are always looking for inspiring stories of service by youth. YSA collects these examples year round in order to have a database ready to pitch to media partners.

■ *Brand—what's in a name?*

YSA has worked to make its "brand" and name widely known so that media, sponsors, community groups, and youth can know who to contact to find information and resources on youth service and participation in the United States. This has benefited the overall field as YSA channels the multitude of media and other inquiries to its member organizations and to highlight youth-led projects.

■ *Create knowledge tools that are "plug and play"*

YSA has recognized that many organizations have similar needs and very limited time and cash resources to meet them. Therefore, YSA has focused on creating tools

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**In 2000, YSA partnered with the pop music sensation Backstreet Boys to do a national contest to highlight youth who were doing service in each city of their nationwide concert tour.**

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**Technology plays an increasing role in how youth get connected to civic action opportunities, how they create their own projects, and how information about what works and other resources is quickly made available to all.**

and program services that require little human resource commitment on the part of local organizations, but can have a large impact on their members. Examples include YSA's ability to provide a customized copy of its searchable database of volunteer opportunities to sit on other organizations' web sites in a way that it appears to be a seamless part of that site. Also, YSA creates Tip Sheets and Resource Packets with key information on 100 different topics to which partner organizations can add their logo and send out through their own membership networks.

■ *Remember what youth are looking for*

According to research, 91 percent of young people would volunteer if someone asked them to or they knew where to get involved. Youth volunteer because they want to contribute and help others, as well as they want to have fun doing service with their friends. Service projects therefore need to be well structured to ensure young people can immediately see the concrete impact of their work, and can promote a sense of being part of a team of friends.

■ *Use technology as a tool to scale up*

Technology plays an increasing role in how youth get connected to civic action opportunities, how they create their own projects, and how information about what works and other resources is quickly made available to all. YSA has built technology tools around these three areas, and uses a growing email contact list of 5,000 youth and organizations to disseminate its weekly National Service Briefing. This weekly newsletter is YSA's greatest ongoing communication tool to connect youth and organizations with YSA and other organizations' resources.

■ *Create strong networks through clear responsibilities and benefits*

YSA does nothing alone. Each of its programs is built on a Partnership Framework that engages anywhere from 10 to more than 100 organizations as partners to expand national reach. YSA develops a Partnership Agreement for each program that lays out specific responsibilities expected of partners and the benefits those partners receive.

■ *Engage key corporate allies by complementing each other's needs and assets*

Corporations have the power to reach mass audiences of youth and adults in a way very few nonprofits could by themselves. YSA carefully analyzes corporate needs and interests in the youth market. It then designs cause-related marketing programs with those companies to support scaling up service programs while also benefiting the corporation's community image. Recently, YSA partnered with Hasbro, a major toy manufacturer, and FAO Schwarz, a major toy store, to carry out a national campaign that enabled youth to be sponsored for play and service activities they were doing—and then donate their sponsorship money to the local charity of their choice. In addition, the companies gave YSA money to create a Youth Service Action Fund to

which youth nationwide could apply for small grants for their youth action projects.

■ *Remember that all youth should have the opportunity to participate in their community*

YSA has worked hard recently to expand its programs and tools to organizations that work with hard-to-reach youth or those who otherwise wouldn't have the opportunity to participate. Last year, YSA launched its Able 2 Serve program that supported local projects that engaged youth with disabilities in service. It also launched a program focused on engaging youth in undeserved inner city communities to volunteer. These efforts to reach ALL youth are important, since research has shown that giving youth the opportunity to give back to their community is one of the five essential resources they need for a healthy and full development. The other four resources are: caring and committed adults, safe places, a healthy start, and marketable skills.<sup>15</sup>

■ *Reflection as a key to long-term change*

Service learning differs from sporadic volunteering mainly because it includes well thought out components on volunteer preparation and ongoing reflection about the activity by the participants. This reflection process has been shown to be the key to bringing about changes in knowledge, attitudes, and practices by youth, regardless of the issue. Helping youth to reflect on why the homeless man that they served soup to that morning was homeless, what policies could reduce the number of homeless persons in their community, how youth felt about meeting people who are homeless—all help young people better understand the issues, and hopefully think of new ways to make a sustainable difference in their communities.

■ *At the end of the day, it is about capacity building*

Youth is a transitory stage of life, but it is important to make sure that young people develop their core competencies and capacities during this stage. YSA emphasizes the importance of creating programs and tools that focus on how local or national groups strengthen their organizational or individual competencies around scaling up effective youth civic action.

*Michael McCabe joined YSA in February 1998 after working four years at the Inter-American Foundation (IAF) as the Coordinator of Youth Programs and Country Representative for Mexico, Nicaragua, Costa Rica, Panama, and Venezuela. He also is one of the founders and coordinators of the Inter-American Working Group on Youth Development, a consortium of eight donor agencies which seeks to increase resource support and promote learning around effective youth development programs in the hemisphere. A consultant on youth issues for U.S. and international NGOs, he has recently moved to the Dominican Republic as Peace Corps Deputy Director.*

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**All youth should have the opportunity to participate in their community. YSA has worked hard recently to expand its programs and tools to organizations that work with hard-to-reach youth or those who otherwise wouldn't have the opportunity to participate.**

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<sup>15</sup> Search Institute (1997) America's Promise: The Alliance for Youth—Five Promises for Children and Youth, Minneapolis, Minnesota. ([www.search-institute.org](http://www.search-institute.org))

The case studies profiled in this report are very diverse in terms of the local context from which they emerge, the level of "readiness" of each profiled country for youth engagement activities, and the author's life experience. But within that diversity, there are some common themes that emerge on what factors enable and encourage youth involvement in arenas traditionally reserved for adults. Among the "enabling" factors that encourage youth participation are the following:

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**In some cases, adults may take on the role of advisors; in others, it may be more effective to establish partnerships. Creativity, open-mindedness, and innovation appear as key ingredients in successful adult-youth working relationships.**

### **Enabling factors**

#### **A shift in adults' thinking about youth**

A number of the case studies point to the notion that settings that enable youth participation have undergone a paradigm shift in terms of how adults in those settings think about youth. Organizations that are successful in involving young people in meaningful ways are able to translate this attitude into policies and programs that incorporate youth as partners in community building. At the same time, achieving this attitudinal change in the home and school environment is key. As the primary arenas where the socialization process takes place, these are places where young people can first internalize the values of democratic participation, individual responsibility for the public good, and civic engagement.

#### **Commitment and support from adults and also from peers**

An environment that is favorable to youth engagement is not only created by a shift in adults' thinking but also by adults who translate that positive attitude into true commitments and activities to promote young people's involvement. The International Youth Foundation (IYF) calls this resource "the presence of an irrationally committed adult." At the same time, the trust and encouragement from youth's peers cannot be underestimated.

#### **A change in young people's attitudes towards adults**

Youth participation works if young people change their own perceptions toward the older generation and see themselves as partners with adults in community initiatives. Effective adult-youth partnerships are a result of a mutual understanding of each group's culture, and of their commitment to collaborate considering differences in communication and work styles, priorities, and decision-making approaches. In some cases, adults may take on the role of advisors; in others, it may be more effective to establish partnerships. Creativity, open-mindedness, and innovation appear as key ingredients in successful adult-youth working relationships.

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### **A recognition that leadership and participation are not a factor of age**

It is clear from the authors' reflections that active participation and strong leadership are not dependent on age, but rather on personal factors such as motivation to achieve, vision, and passion for a cause. They are also dependent upon external conditions such as opportunities to participate, the involvement of committed and supportive individuals, organizational policies, and political contexts. Moving away from age and maturity as criteria to determine who is a community asset and who is not is key to increasing meaningful youth engagement and active citizenship.

### **A deliberate choice to take risks**

Projects and organizations that engage youth in their activities in meaningful ways are ready to challenge established systems. Adults involved in efforts that engage youth in areas such as planning and implementation, evaluation, and decision-making are comfortable with the notion that project results may be different than if they had been conducted by adults only. Individuals engaged in these efforts are open to such differences and believe that the projects that emerge from adult-youth collaborations are a more accurate reflection of the community as a whole.

### **A dramatic change in how media portray youth**

The media is a powerful tool to shape public opinion. When the news focus is on youth as victims and criminals but rarely as peer educators or youth council presidents, it is difficult to raise the public's awareness about young people as strong and resourceful individuals in search of avenues for civic engagement.

### **The emergence of structures and institutions for youth participation**

Youth participation increases not only when young people are incorporated into "adult decision-making processes." As youth expert Rakesh Rajani has noted, institutionalizing youth participation in settings and practices that young people experience on a regular basis is key to training youth to participate, as is focusing on issues relevant to youth. Such settings include school and local government, youth organizations, issue clubs, and sports teams. Legislation, political frameworks, and sustainable funding that recognize youth participation as an important dimension of community and youth development are essential.

### **The need for evaluation strategies**

The programs and initiatives described in these case studies indicate the need to take stock of their own progress and results, assessing the effectiveness of different approaches and changing course when needed.

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## Funding

Initiatives to promote youth involvement succeed when they are sustainable.

Funding instability, on the other hand, has a demoralizing effect on youth, a situation that must be avoided if the goal is to promote civic engagement and a sense of belonging in the younger generation.

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**Some of the organizations profiled in these pages use interactive websites as vehicles to support their efforts and achieve their specific goals. Such is the case of Rui Mesquita's Recife Voluntario and Michael McCabe's Youth Service America, both of whose organizations seek to match volunteers with service opportunities.**

## New Avenues for Youth Participation

The case studies presented in this report profile initiatives of local, national, and international scope: a school-sponsored service learning internship in a Buenos Aires neighborhood, a leadership development program in India, and organizations that seek to mainstream youth engagement at the national level in established or new democracies. Some of the organizations profiled in these pages use interactive websites as vehicles to support their efforts and achieve their specific goals. Such is the case of Rui Mesquita's Recife Voluntario and Michael McCabe's Youth Service America, both of whose organizations seek to match volunteers with service opportunities.

There is an emerging strategy to promote youth participation by using electronic communications to engage youth in social action through what has been called "cyber-participation." The increasing use of technology allows young people to become aware of opportunities offered outside their own community, including jobs, internships, scholarships, conferences, and international events. Most importantly, young people can communicate, learn, and gain inspiration from exchanges with other young people around the world—youth participation without geographic boundaries. Examples of this form of youth engagement can be found in the following sites:

**YouthActionNet**<sup>16</sup> ([www.youthactionnet.org](http://www.youthactionnet.org)) is a website designed to nurture and inspire youth leadership around the world. It offers resources, tools, inspirational stories, information on volunteer opportunities, and a discussion forum for young people to connect with each other and find support and ideas to become involved in social change initiatives. Both Thomas Busch and Rui Mesquita are members of the youth task force that actively contributes to the development of the site.

**Global Youth Connect** ([www.globalyouthconnect.org](http://www.globalyouthconnect.org)) is a web-based youth-led organization for human rights activists that offers action email lists, links, and resources to unite youth activists around the world.

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<sup>16</sup>YouthActionNet is part of the Make a Connection program, <http://www.makeaconnection.org/>, a global initiative between Nokia and IYF, aimed at giving young people around the world opportunities to "make a connection" to their communities, to their families and peers, and to themselves.



[Pro Youth International](http://www.alli.fi/euro) (www.alli.fi/euro) offers information on youth issues and country links to volunteer, environmental, political, and human rights sites in Europe.

[European Youth Forum](http://www.youthforum.org) (www.youthforum.org) connects 99 nationwide organizations from Europe to empower young people to become involved in human rights, democracy building, and mutual understanding.

[Taking IT Global](http://www.takingitglobal.org) (www.takingitglobal.org) is a youth-driven site created to foster a sense of leadership and social entrepreneurship through the innovative use of technology. It features specific pages for each region of the world.

[Voices of Youth](http://www.unicef.org/voy) (www.unicef.org/voy), a UNICEF site, is set up specifically for online discussions and interactive learning projects with a focus on children's rights issues.

[I\\*EARN](http://www.iearn.org) (www.iearn.org) offers teachers and students in 90 countries curricula to work together online and learn about each other's culture and increase understanding and collaboration.

The above are only a few examples of the increasing number of websites aimed at facilitating the engagement of youth in social action projects. The websites are often the virtual arm of organizations, which find in technology a vehicle to scale up their youth participation efforts. A common objection to the reliance on technology to increase youth involvement is that lack of access to that technology (as Oliver Tayo comments in his piece about the role of cell phones in recent events in the Philippines) is an impediment to young people's participation. This cannot be denied. However, there are indications that technological innovations are emerging to narrow the digital divide (such as setting up a computer with Internet access in a rural community center or the increasing number of distance learning programs). Even language barriers are beginning to blur due to translation software packages. These resources are still in their preliminary development stages, but given the pace of technological change it can be expected that their quality will improve.

If used appropriately, communications technology lifts geographic and cultural boundaries, makes time zones irrelevant, and can be used as a vast educational resource. With these qualities in mind, how can technology make youth participation efforts more effective? It can offer young people the possibility of sharing effective practices, exchanging contacts and resources, and most importantly creating an awareness about a global community of youth seeking social change.

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**A common objection to the reliance on technology to increase youth involvement is that lack of access to that technology is an impediment to young people's participation.**

Such examples of electronic participation and the experiences presented in these pages highlight the importance of youth engagement as a strategy for social inclusion. We build democratic societies by opening up opportunities and creating structures to involve all segments of the population in matters that affect them, and youth cannot be left out from that process. It is a challenging endeavor that requires profound changes in how societies think about their young, changes that need to be reflected in new language, in appropriate funding, in training to facilitate inter-generational collaborations, in organizational structures that welcome youth voices, and in policies that encourage youth engagement.

How can this be achieved? We find specific examples in the case studies themselves. Teachers have alternatives to the traditional curriculum: service-learning projects teach students both academic competencies (writing reports, preparing budgets, researching social issues) as well as citizenship and life skills (empathy, commitment, planning, decision-making, and teamwork). Incorporating youth into organizational structures can be challenging, both for the adults and for the young people themselves. But identifying obstacles and solutions, and providing relevant training for how to work together are concrete steps towards making organizations more representative and increasing the quality of their services. Journalists and other media workers can offer workshops for young people on how to "sell" their story. At the same time, regular dialogues among youth, media, and decision-makers can be effective ways to shape public opinion and policies to make youth engagement a matter of course. This is not easy work, but the rewards are significant: a stronger civil society where all members feel included, respected, and responsible for building community.

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