



# Service as a Strategy

## Addressing Critical National Needs

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**Innovations in Civic Participation** (ICP) is a non-profit social change organization that supports the development of innovative, high-quality youth civic engagement policies and programs both in the US and around the world. Founded in 2001, ICP is dedicated to creating opportunities for young people to change their communities for the better and build essential skills for future success. Funded through a multi-year grant from the Ford Foundation, we partner with individuals and organizations around the globe to stimulate innovation around two civic engagement strategies: national youth service and service-learning. At ICP, we believe that well-structured youth service programs can provide innovative solutions to social and environmental issues, while helping young people develop skills for future employment and active citizenship.

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# Introduction

**T**hroughout recent history, global leaders have used national service as a tool to address critical national needs. “In one of his last messages, Mahatma Gandhi urged India to form a service corps, a service army to undertake a thirteen-fold constructive programme to bring literacy and health care and schools and agricultural co-operation and decency to every village in India.”<sup>i</sup> ICP believes that every country should utilize innovative, efficient and resourceful strategies to respond to critical national needs such as emergency and disaster relief and recovery, critical teacher shortages, and HIV/AIDS prevention and treatment. Young people<sup>ii</sup> represent a diverse and resourceful cohort waiting to be mobilized to address those needs.

Young people can be a resource for providing integral services to their communities through innovative and effective means, instead of being thought of as only the beneficiaries of service. Successful youth service programs provide valuable benefits to both communities and

young people. Given the opportunity through structured youth service programs, young people help communities get things done and play an important role in addressing critical needs in their communities.

Several governments have invested in national youth service programs and enjoyed the benefits of this investment in meeting pressing needs. In order to marshal young people to meet critical national needs, resources should be devoted to innovative programs engaging young people over sustained periods of time. This paper will provide examples of innovative ways to mobilize young people to address critical national needs while calling on communities, governments and nongovernmental organizations to invest in young people as resources for getting things done in their communities.

# An Active Youth Cohort

Numbering 1.5 billion worldwide, young people aged 12-24, represent the largest youth cohort in history.<sup>iii</sup> On average, these young people are better educated and healthier than previous generations and are well poised for mobilization to meet national needs.

However, several institutions and organizations throughout the world remain concerned about youth transition to adulthood and achievement of independent livelihoods in today's complex and volatile world. As young people make the transition to adulthood they are vulnerable to academic decline, behaviors that put them at risk and failure to develop essential life skills for success in adulthood. This can result in higher rates of school dropouts, unemployment, idleness and increased risk of violence.

This large youth cohort also represents the workers, leaders, entrepreneurs and citizens of the future. Youth civic engagement provides opportunities for positive learning outcomes, development of life skills and enhanced employability and responsible citizenship. By participating in programs addressing critical national needs, young people are not only increasing social capital, providing key social services and meeting community needs, but are also building valuable skills for employment and active citizenship.

Service is a proven strategy for reconnecting disconnected young people to their communities. Service-learning projects focus on environmental, economic and social sustainability; provide pathways out of poverty by promoting active citizenship and preparing residents for careers in emerging areas of the economy; and strengthen neighborhood infrastructure and civil institutions by mobilizing financial and human capital.

A recent report prepared under the auspices of the National Youth Leadership Council (US) notes that “engaging in service can offer opportunities for youths to connect with adults who can help them scaffold their transition to adulthood.” It also notes “service may provide unique developmental opportunities for those transitioning to adulthood, but may be especially helpful to those youths with fewer connections to mainstream opportunities and institutions.”<sup>iv</sup> According to the Report of the Commission on National and Community Service (US), service can build community; turn young people

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into “valued, competent resources” rather than clients; “build practical skills and disciples;” and “inculcate a sense of civic responsibility.”<sup>v</sup> Service enables young people to reverse their former patterns of behavior, by not only learning new values, but also by being accountable for living those values. Instead of being a drain on society, they create visible and valued contributions. Instead of disrupting order, they identify and solve public problems.

Every day, young people worldwide prove that they are not a passive group waiting for things to be handed to them. ICP's research indicates that young people enthusiastically choose to participate in service programs when given the opportunity. Throughout the world young people are mobilizing to address human rights, environmental justice and community needs. This active global youth cohort is a tremendous resource that, if given the chance, can contribute meaningfully to the development of their societies. With effective and structured programming, young people can be mobilized as agents for change to meet the needs of their nations.

This large demographic has the ability to contribute actively to meeting critical national needs. However, the United Nations reports that the common constraint to youth participation is the “absence of an enabling environment for youth development and participation.”<sup>vi</sup>

## Youth Service as a Strategy for Addressing Critical National Needs

As governments worldwide devise strategies for addressing critical national needs, a focus should be placed on the role young people play in those strategies. By organizing young people, governments can tap into this resourceful and active cohort to get things done. Nationally-funded service programs engage young people of all classes and levels of education on developmentally-appropriate programs. Some programs focus on out-of-school and “disconnected young people” while others recruit from among society’s most elite.

Because national service is so adaptable, some programs can engage young people in building affordable housing, addressing climate change, and mentoring or teaching other students. In all cases, national service is an effective way to mobilize young people to address important community needs while also building civic awareness and activity in participants.

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There are many models that use youth service as a strategy for meeting critical national needs. These strategies share the characteristic of organizing young people as a resource in innovative programs to meet important national needs, while also providing them with valuable life skills, experience and education.

Structured service programs view young people as assets and allow them to play important roles in their communities. Programs such as this may engage young people as peer mentors to prevent risk behaviors, engage students in post-secondary education to fill needs in health care and teaching or mobilize young people to support recovery and rebuilding efforts following natural disasters. Long-term solutions to critical national needs are more successful when they support young people *and* when young people contribute to the solution. Furthermore, investment in youth mobilization to meet critical national needs provides human, social, and economic benefits positively impacting community development and overcoming critical needs.

The critical needs being met can come from a range of areas identified by the government or from local communities that articulate their own needs. The needs can be long-term or short-term and often affect a significant portion of the nation. Young people should be viewed as an integral resource throughout the processes that governments take in formulating plans to address national needs. A successful model is one in which a government or community defines the national or local need and then organizes structured youth service as a way to address that need.

As described above and according to ICP research, this mobilization provides a significant resource for addressing vital national needs while also providing young people with critical access to service opportunities and life-skills building. This skill building encourages young people to be active participants in their communities while also making them more employable and often bridging gaps between traditional social and political divides. Therefore, youth service can be used as an effective strategy to meet critical national needs and provide important skill building for young people.

# Lessons from the field

Governments and organizations are harnessing the power of young people to meet critical national needs through structured, innovative programs. Young people have been mobilized in response to national disasters such as hurricanes Katrina and Rita in the United States in 2005 or a major earthquake that struck Pakistan that same year. Young people have also been engaged to meet critical teaching, health care or other social service shortages throughout the world by participating in youth service corps as part of their education. Finally, addressing HIV/AIDS crises through peer education in South Africa has proven to be tremendously successful in engaging young people to address this crisis.

## AmeriCorps Response to Hurricane Katrina (United States)

In August 2005, the US Gulf Coast was battered by Hurricane Katrina, considered by many as one of the most devastating natural disasters in US history. Hurricane Katrina made landfall as a category 3 hurricane and resulted in flooding of approximately 80% of New Orleans, Louisiana, as the levee and flood systems failed in more than 50 locations throughout the city. This resulted in significant loss of life and property damage. Approximately 1,833 people were killed in five states and damage totaled nearly \$81 billion.<sup>vii</sup> Residences, businesses, hospitals, schools, government buildings and numerous other structures were destroyed and more than one million people were displaced.<sup>viii</sup> The response to this devastating natural disaster required tremendous human and financial resources in the short- and long-term.

In the aftermath, AmeriCorps members were engaged to address recovery and rebuilding needs. National service programs in the US joined with local, state and national relief and recovery teams to provide assistance to Gulf Coast residents. In the initial aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, the federal government sent hundreds of administrative, emergency and security personnel from throughout the country to the region. AmeriCorps teams were quickly mobilized and sent to the region to assist in emergency operations.<sup>x</sup> AmeriCorps<sup>ix</sup> members deployed to assist in donations and volunteer management efforts as well as mass care efforts. More than 1,650 volunteers assisted in the immediate aftermath of the disaster.<sup>xi</sup>

Since that time, many more AmeriCorps members have helped to rebuild Gulf Coast communities. Community volunteers also remained engaged in rebuilding the region after the initial recovery stages providing much-needed help in reconstruction of communities. AmeriCorps also saw enrollment rates increase as more Americans were compelled to help in the rebuilding of the Gulf Coast through service.<sup>xiii</sup> Gulf Coast residents relied on the invaluable services provided by AmeriCorps volunteers to help rebuild their community, with one resident saying, “A well-prepared and dedicated volunteer corps is not just a nice thing to have, but is absolutely essential to disaster recovery efforts.”<sup>xiii</sup> AmeriCorps service programs successfully organized volunteers to provide resources and support for meeting the vital national needs of recovery and rebuilding following Hurricane Katrina.

## Zivildienst providing support to an aging population (Germany)

Similar to other parts of the developed world, Germany’s population is aging. Nearly 19% of Germany’s 82 million people are over 65 years old.<sup>xiv</sup> The trend of low birth rates and longer life expectancies is expected to continue to contribute a growing population of elderly in Germany. While the aging

### AmeriCorps

AmeriCorps was established in 1994 as a network of local, state and national service programs. Today it connects over 75,000 Americans each year in service to meet vital national needs in the US. The vast majority of AmeriCorps members are young people attracted by the Segal Education Award available to alumni to help finance higher education or job training.

AmeriCorps is administered by the Corporation for National and Community Service (an independent federal agency and the largest funder of national service programs in the US), which brings together service-oriented civil society organizations to develop programs addressing community needs. Since its inception, AmeriCorps volunteers have engaged in public-focused initiatives on a diverse array of projects throughout the US.

population is also healthier than previous generations, it continues to put a strain on institutions providing health and social care to this aging sector of society.

Young people have been mobilized to respond to the growing need of providing support to older Germans. Through two youth service programs, the Zivildienst and Volunteer Social Year, young people provide support to the elderly. Through these programs, young people interested in social services or conscientious objectors to military service participate in programs providing a range of social services throughout Germany. In particular, these young people spend between six months and 18 months supporting aging Germans – ranging from delivering food to providing daily assistance to high-needs seniors. The young people receive a stipend and other social benefits and often can use their service as a stepping stone to a career in social service.

Through the national youth service programs, young people in Germany are gaining valuable life skills while actively filling the critical and growing need of caring for the growing cohort of aging Germans.

### **loveLife's groundBREAKERS in the Fight Against HIV/AIDS (South Africa)**

South Africa has faced an epidemic of HIV/AIDS in young people over the last decade. More than five million South Africans are living with HIV, with about 35 percent of HIV infections occurring before the age of 20. With projected increases of up to eight million South Africans being infected with HIV by 2010, South Africa's GDP could be reduced by 20% as a result of the disease.<sup>xvii</sup>

In response to this pressing national need, the innovative national HIV-prevention campaign in South Africa, loveLife, has used peer mentoring and face-to-face interactions to encourage behavior change in young people to prevent HIV infection. Through loveLife's national youth service program groundBREAKERS (gB), young people between 18 and 25 are targeted in a community service and training program. The program links *mpintshis*<sup>xviii</sup> to counsel 12-17 year olds at loveLife centers, clinics and schools. More than 1,500 groundBREAKERS volunteers for one year<sup>xix</sup> to coordinate *mpintshis* operating in 638 communities and almost 5,000 schools.<sup>xx</sup>

## **Zivildienst**

Zivildienst was created in the late 1950s as an alternative for young conscientious objectors to military service. As of 2005, approximately 90,000 young men under 23 are completing their service through Zivildienst.<sup>xv</sup> Young men serve for nine months in a variety of social service organizations.

The Volunteer Social Year began in 1962 as a youth service program that was available for women and those seeking a career in social services. To date, 26,000 young people between 16-27 years old are providing social services throughout Germany through the Social Year.<sup>xvi</sup> Young people serve for a period of six to 18 months in numerous organizations throughout Germany.

## **loveLife**

Launched in 1999, loveLife's programs include a nationwide media campaign, a public health quality improvement program, a sexual health helpline, sports initiatives and the youth service program groundBREAKERS. loveLife's programs are implemented by its national youth service corps, gB, who focus on the face-to-face contact with young people that loveLife believes is essential to change behavior for HIV prevention. loveLife's programs target 12-17 year olds to promote sexual health and healthy lifestyles

In 2003, research found that young people who had been exposed to more than three loveLife programs, especially gB, were 60% less likely to be HIV positive.<sup>xxi</sup> A further assessment released in 2008, found that gB graduates have very positive attitudes about HIV, such as high levels of awareness, feelings of responsibility for their and their partner's health, and how to deal with HIV prevention. Seventy-seven percent of graduates indicated that they were very concerned with HIV compared to 58% of those questioned prior to participating in the program.<sup>xxii</sup> loveLife, though gB, has been very successful in implementing innovative and structured youth service programs to address the HIV/AIDS crisis in South Africa.

loveLife has received support from numerous sectors, including the South African National Youth Service. The South African National Youth Service started in 2005 engaging nearly 12,000 participants in projects throughout the health, construction, environment, education, agriculture and social development sectors.<sup>xxiii</sup>

# Lessons from the field

## Servicio Social Filling a Need for Doctors in Rural Mexico

Mexico, like many other countries, experiences a chronic lack of medical professionals and resources in its rural areas. Many trained doctors look for better-paying employment in urban areas or outside of Mexico. According to the World Health Organization, Mexico had 195,897<sup>xxiv</sup> physicians out of a population of approximately 97 million in 2000.

In 1937, the Mexican government initiated a program, *Servicio Social*, requiring all medical students to serve for six months in areas lacking medical services.<sup>xxv</sup> By integrating service into the university system, students filled a critical need in the shortage of medical services, while also engaging in valuable experiential learning experiences. The students also sent reports back to universities detailing the general conditions, the state of sanitation and disease rates where they were serving. This program was very successful in providing health services to rural areas.

The tremendous positive impact of *Servicio Social* resulted in the federal government doubling its expenditures on public health and expanding the program in 1947 to include mandatory requirements for all students in higher education to take part in national service.<sup>xxvi</sup>

## The Poverty Alleviation Relay Project (China)

China represents a country of 1.3 billion people going through rapid economic, structural and social transformation. Rural and urban areas have witnessed decades of extreme poverty that is now being alleviated in many communities. Between 1980 and 2005, the absolute poor population in rural areas declined from 250 million to 26.1 million.<sup>xxvii</sup> The UN Development Programme (UNDP) indicates that China has already met the Millennium Development Goal of halving the number of people in extreme poverty by 2015.<sup>xxviii</sup> However, much more needs to be done as China continues to face new and complex development and poverty concerns. China is facing significant disparities in poverty and literacy rates between the rural and urban areas. The UNDP Human Development Indices in 2005 for urban areas was 0.816 compared to only 0.685 in rural areas.<sup>xxix</sup>

## Servicio Social

*Servicio Social* was founded by the federal government in 1937. University students serve in fields such as public health to fill shortages in rural areas. Under the current law, all university and graduate students must complete 480 hours of service as a requirement for graduation.

## The Chinese Young Volunteers Association

The Chinese Young Volunteers Association was initiated by the Central Communist Youth League in 1993. During its first decade in operation, over 80 million young people provided over 4.1 billion hours of service through CYVA. CYVA's Poverty Alleviation Relay program receives some funding and regulation from the central government, while approximately 80% of the projects are run at the local level. Young people voluntarily participating in the program typically receive a stipend from the central government and housing and transportation from the community they serve.<sup>xxxii</sup>

China's decline in poverty has come about through economic growth in conjunction with Government of China's programs for poverty alleviation. The development gap between rural and urban can continue to be addressed in part through China's youth volunteer policies and the provision of youth service programs to engage young people in volunteerism.

Through the establishment of the Chinese Young Volunteers Association's Poverty Alleviation Relay Project in 1996, the Chinese government engaged young volunteers in service opportunities in rural areas primarily in central and western China to meet its pressing poverty alleviation needs. In particular, the volunteers fill posts in basic education and public health and hygiene for six-months to two years. This program specifically engages university graduates, to serve in rural communities. Approximately 70% serve as teachers at the primary or secondary level<sup>xxx</sup> and the volunteers are credited with significantly helping the villages improve in education, health and development.<sup>xxxi</sup> These young people have been successfully organized to meet the critical needs of rural communities and assist in alleviation of poverty in those rural areas.

# Challenges and Recommendations

## Challenges and Recommendations for Program and Policy Design

These lessons from the field present encouraging examples of service as a strategy for meeting critical national needs in all regions of the world. While it is often difficult to quantify the outcomes of service projects, these examples all represent areas in which service clearly addressed some aspect of a need in the community and provided positive results. In addition, while service strategies vary in program design and implementation, several of these models, such as service opportunities in education, health care and disaster relief, have been successfully used in numerous countries. It is important to note however that these strategies are not without challenges and must be approached with the necessary context, resources, and government and community support to succeed.

For large national youth service programs to be effective, governmental support is a necessary precondition that may then allow programs to grow in scale and to secure funding from either the nonprofit sector, non-governmental organizations or the private sector. In many contexts, governments can identify the critical needs that must be met and then provide the mandate, funding and support to effectively use youth service to meet these needs. However, it is imperative that governments provide adequate resources for these programs to succeed. Government can provide resources for scaling up smaller programs that have been proven effective. In order to provide the long-term support that meeting critical needs often requires, national youth service programs should not be used to achieve political ends, but should be provided non-partisan support and the mandate to continue throughout administration changes.

In addition to governmental involvement, local and international non-governmental organizations as well as donors can play a variety of important roles such as investing in innovative programs, funding research on the impact of youth service programs and advising governments on the most effective ways to design programs. National youth service programs need the investment of governmental, non-governmental organizations and/or international organizations and donors in order to succeed on a large scale.

Further, the program design for these models varies according to context, the resources available and the needs being addressed. Within this context, there are steps that investors and program managers can take to ensure more effective programming. This includes developing a program design with a clear identification of the target population and need the program is addressing. It is also important to define the program goals and the role that young people will play in the service program. Finally, specific implementation strategies including the roles and responsibilities of different stakeholders are necessary for effective implementation of these programs. Provided the necessary investment, resources and context-specific design, youth service programs have enormous potential for successfully mobilizing an active youth cohort to address vital national needs.

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National youth service programs need the investment of governmental, non-governmental organizations and/or international organizations and donors in order to succeed.

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# Conclusion

Throughout the world, youth service has been and can be used as a positive strategy for addressing critical national needs. Whether stepping in to help recover and rebuild after a natural disaster, fulfilling education and health care shortages, addressing issues related to climate change or working with peers to curb the spread of HIV/AIDS, young people have a positive and valuable role to play and service offers the opportunity to do so.

When given the necessary resources and carried out through well-designed programs, young people have the potential to be agents of change in their communities. Rather than just as beneficiaries of these national services and resources, young people can be viewed as stakeholders in their communities and mobilized to get things done and meet critical national needs.

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